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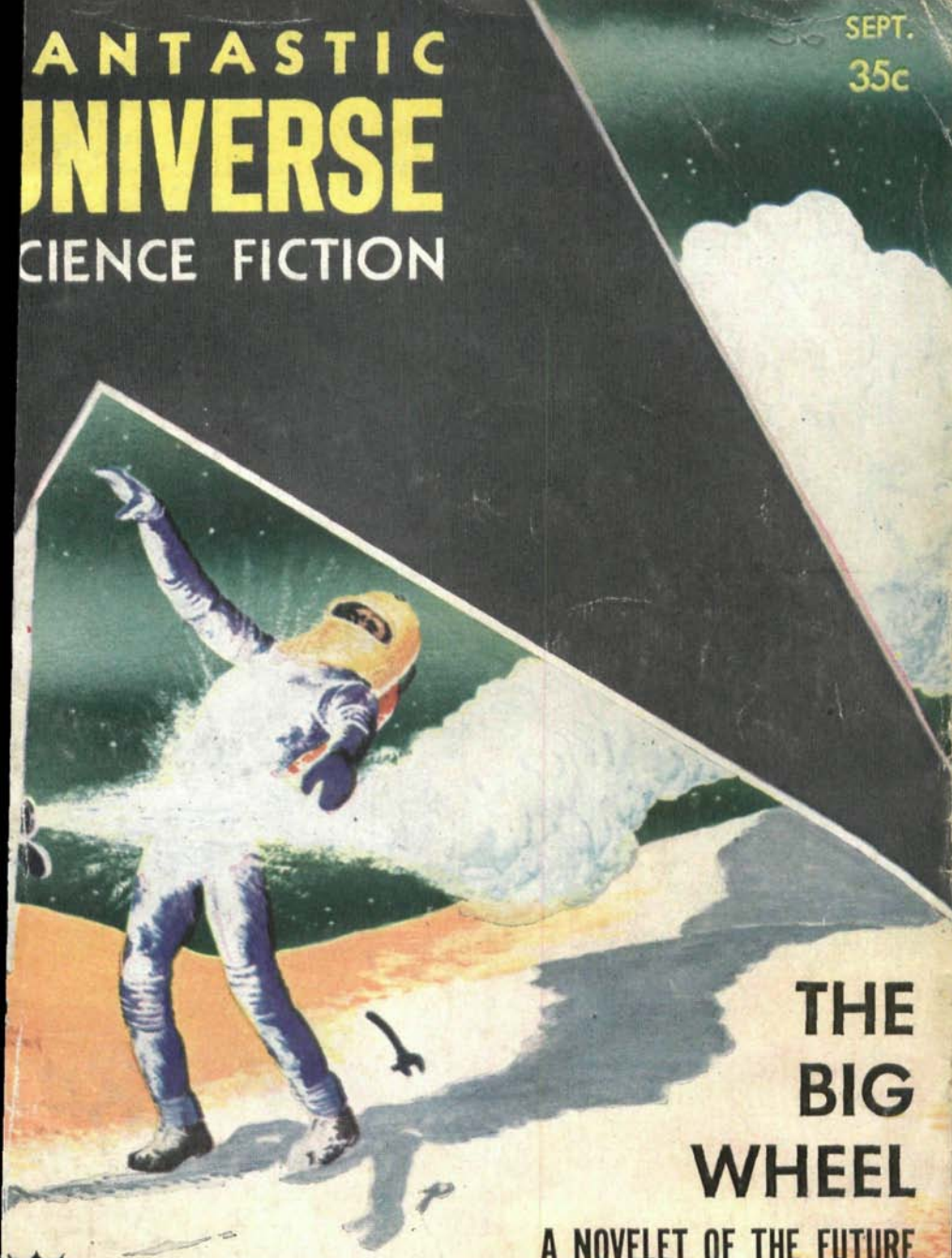

THE BIG WHEEL

A NOVELET OF THE FUTURE

By JAMES E. GUNN

KING SIZE
BLICATION

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STORY BEHIND THE COVER . . .

EVERYBODY on the Council was agreed that the Invaders must die. These strange two-legged animals with their small heads and loud voices were obvious barbarians. Granted that they had some skills, these were skills the potentialities of which they obviously hardly understood. They had come here to the Mother Planet in their silver and grey monstrosity, sent exploration parties out over the plains, trampled down vegetation that the *birul* live on, invaded the sacred grove and stolen the image of *Kotor* from it, and driven away the Elders of the Moon Clan when these had paid a visit of ceremony to the barbarians' camp.

The Venerable Rahat, one of the Elders of the Clan, told later how he'd felt the thoughts of the aliens as they'd faced them. Yes, these strange barbarians could think. The Venerable One had sensed successive emotions, he'd reported later to the Council—first obvious curiosity, then the sensation of fear, and then, this shrilly, "Destroy! Destroy!" Truly these were barbarians!

The Council had decreed, many, many periods ago, that it was unlawful to will another being into the final sleep. There was some debate in the Council now. There were idealists who felt that even though these aliens were not Intelligences in our sense of the word, granted that they undoubtedly were dangerous, it was still not in accordance with the First Law to even think of sending them to their final sleep. At this the Venerable Rahat, breathing heavily, quivering with rage, released such thoughts that the idealists—and even others of us—winced from sheer pain.

A necessary preliminary to executing the aliens was to damage the Thing in which they had arrived, which stood near their camp, pointing up towards the home of the Thunder God, constantly guarded by one of the two-legged ones.

I was assigned to this. It was a simple thing, of course, to take possession of the alien guard's mind. One minute it was hitting at the sides of the monstrosity with a strange-looking instrument. The next minute I was commanding its body to rise from the ground to which it'd fallen. It began to stagger slowly, slowly, towards the towering grey Thing, clutching the pronged instrument in a covered tendril, soon searching, along the Thing's side, for the opening I wanted. There *had* to be an opening!

But—what was this? Something strange was pouring out of the side of the Thing at me. I could feel the clumsy body of the alien wincing as if from pain. I was losing control of its mind—it was staggering as the strange vapor hit it.

I *had* to retreat. I thought I heard the vapor laugh—a shrill, victorious laugh. Obviously these barbarians did have some knowledge after all, I realized, as I waited for a moment in the shadows. Perhaps it *would* be wrong to send them to their final sleep. . . .

Blek, nephew of Rahat.

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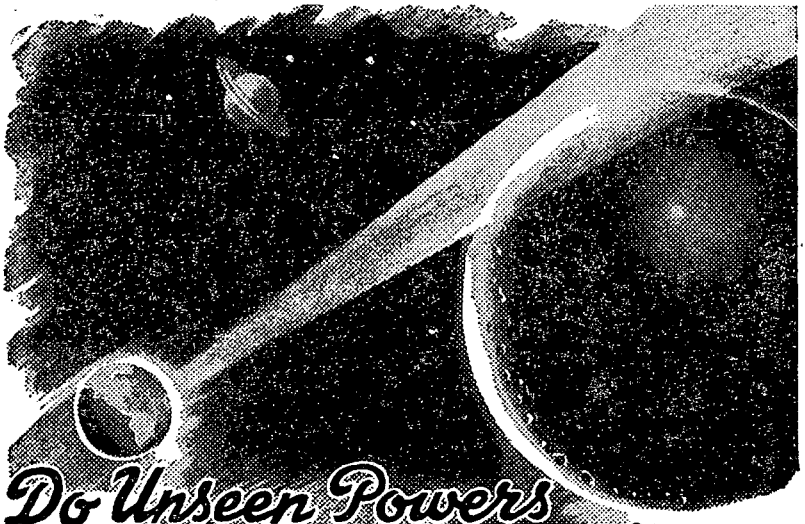

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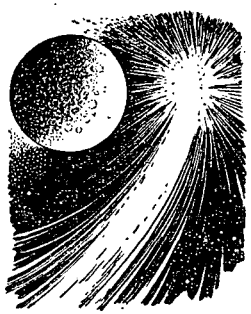

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the big wheel

by . . . James E. Gunn

Men like gods must walk humbly at first — for science and the future are stern taskmasters.

NAKED AND ANONYMOUS, I shivered in the cold, barren corridor, my arms folded across my chest, a waiting human cipher in a line of men equally naked, equally anonymous.

Clothes make the man, I thought. But that wasn't quite it. *Clothes give us the courage to be men.* Yes, that was a little better.

There was this to be said for nudism: without their clothes all men are brothers. *Rich man, poor man, beggarman, Red . . .*

It was appropriate that we should be standing there naked. Through some unknown sin, through some unsuspected crime against society, we had lost the right to be men. We had been stripped of our jobs, of our rightful places in society. We had been stripped of our pride and our manhood. No indignity was too great an expiation.

Insecurity does that to a man.

This was no different from any other government project: make haste to get here, hurry to get undressed, hurry to wait. I hoped

As we read our daily newspapers, watch television or listen to our favorite news commentator on the radio we are likely to forget that man's most momentous stake in the future—the greatest drama of all!—is taking place elsewhere. Daily in our laboratories and construction plants the future is being charted by men of creative genius in a race to excel, to achieve technical mastery over space and time. The Earth satellite project is now news—timely and hugely exciting. Here James Gunn reveals what that project can mean to Everyman, and gives a brilliant account of hazards heroically surmounted.

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it was inefficiency. I didn't like to think that it was policy—an indignity intended to render us properly malleable.

But these days there were many things I didn't like to think.

The line stirred restlessly. Someone coughed. I looked at my watch. It had been only half an hour. I shivered again.

The man in front of me turned, grinning. He was big and blond and pot-bellied. "Cold?" he asked.

"Cold enough."

"You should have some insulation like me," he said. He patted his belly. "But if you think you're cold, look at the guy behind you."

I turned. In back of me was a thin, dark-haired boy. I stared rudely, but I couldn't help it. I'd always thought the phrase "blue with cold" was hyperbole.

"I—I w-wish they'd h-hurry up-p!" the boy said between chattering teeth.

Behind him was a lean, saturnine man with mobile, black eyebrows over deep-set eyes. "The mills of our economic gods grind slowly," he said in a resonant, public-speaker's voice, "but they will grind us exceeding fine."

I grinned. "My name's Bruce Patterson," I said to the three of them.

"Jock Eckert," said the pot-bellied blond, sticking out a meaty hand at the end of a massive forearm.

"George Kendrix," said the man behind the boy.

"Clary Calhoun," said the boy.

"You're kidding!" Eckert protested.

The boy looked sheepish. "No—that's my name."

"Cheer up," I said. "Maybe you'll outgrow it."

We laughed together. It was an alchemy that made us men again.

At the head of the line, a door opened. A crisp, authoritative voice said, "The first ten, file in." The speaker counted them off. "That's all. We'll get to the rest of you as soon as possible."

The line shuffled forward. I counted the heads in front of us: thirteen. "What's the job?" I asked. "Anybody know?"

Eckert shrugged. "Who cares? It's a government job, it's a construction job, and it pays triple time for hazard. Any construction job they got, I can handle."

"Not government exactly," Kendrix corrected. "C.I.C. There's a difference."

"Not in my book," Eckert growled. "It's a boondoggle like the Hell River job, but when they're passing it out little Jock is going to be in line. Triple time goes a long way these days."

"That's right," I agreed, hearing a hungriness in my voice, and hating it.

The door opened again. "Ten more. One at a time. Don't push. You'll all get in."

The door closed. We moved up. *Next time,* I thought. "You didn't help us build the field?"

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"I was a foreman at Hell River," Eckert said. "This job sounded better, so I quit and came down."

"You aren't married then."

"These times? Hell, no!"

"You're lucky," I said.

Eckert turned on Clary. "What are you grinning at? You know something?"

"Maybe." Clary's grin broadened. "You'll know soon enough."

"Listen to the kid!" Eckert shook his head. "He thinks he's grown up because he's here with the men. Bet this is his first job. How about you, Patterson? What did you do before the Crash?"

"I was an inspector for an automated production line." I laughed bitterly. "And then they got a hunk of metal, wire, and transistors to take *my* place."

"Kendrix?"

"Believe it or not," Kendrix said, "I was an economics professor in a Midwestern college. I got fired for calling a spade a spade. Specifically, I said we were in the middle of the biggest depression economic man had ever known."

"What is it when twenty million men are out of work," Eckert asked, "if it ain't a depression?"

Clary looked puzzled.

Kendrix laughed and seemed genuinely amused. "Why, it's a rolling recession, a technological readjustment, a correction, a mild dip, a downswing, a return to normalcy—anything but the boogy-word. I was called to testify before a congressional committee. For the sake of my convictions, I joined the unemployables."

The door opened. "Ten more," said the voice of authority.

It came from a man no older than I, but he wore the soft, gray semi-uniform of C.I.C. *Take away his clothes,* I thought, *and where would his authority be?*

Meekly we filed into the antiseptic whiteness of a hospital ward. It had been stripped of everything except a few desks, a few chairs, and an examination table. Behind the desks and on the chairs sat doctors in their white jackets, their stethoscopes hung around their necks like identifying medallions.

Eckert moved into the production line, responding to questions and directions with no more free will than the lowliest servomechanism.

"Ever had any serious illnesses? Mumps? Insanity in your family? Ever been seasick? Airsick? Bend over. Spread your cheeks. Ever have a hernia . . . ?"

Farther down the line, men were stepping onto boxes and down again, over and over, trying to balance themselves on one foot with their eyes closed, doing deep knee bends, adjusting cords attached to distant pegs, reading eye charts.

I closed my eyes. *Let me get the job,* I thought prayerfully. *Please let me get the job!*

"I'll tell you what it is," Clary whispered in my ear.

I turned. Clary's face was eager-

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ly alive, his eyes bright with a secret vision.

"We're going to build a satellite," he whispered.

II

THE MAKESHIFT hall was stuffy and hot with the animal heat and exhalations of five hundred men. There were at least five hundred of us sitting on the hard, folding chairs, wondering what was coming next. I started counting heads and got to 373 before I lost track and gave up.

We sat at the back, the four of us: Eckert, Clary Calhoun, Kendrix, and me. We had all passed the physical. It was good to be dressed again, but it was even better to be that much closer to the job. *Three hundred dollars a week,* I thought greedily, and felt ashamed.

"What makes you think it's a satellite?" I asked Clary.

"If it weren't, I wouldn't be here," Clary said confidently. "I couldn't get an appointment to the Academy, you see. I went to college, studied rocket engineering and things like that. But by the time I was graduated the Depression was in full swing and nobody was building rockets. Then I heard about this."

I imagined myself drifting up there in the sky, in the frigid void, in the eternal night, building a satellite, and I shivered in spite of the heat.

"Why build another satellite?" I demanded querulously.

Hendrix arched his knowing eyebrows. "The C.I.C. has reasons —public reasons and private reasons."

"Am I the only one who didn't get the word?"

"I'm another," Eckert said, and chuckled. "But I don't give a damn. If they've got a job, I'll do it for them. They pay me enough, I'll build them a satellite around Jupiter."

"The modern Hercules—and his motive," said Hendrix.

"Doesn't it make your heart beat faster?" Clary asked eagerly. "To be part of the great adventure of our time?"

"I haven't lost anything up there," I said curtly.

Beside the platform at the front of the hall, a door opened. Four men trouped through and up onto the rough stage: one in C.I.C. gray, one in Air Force blue, the other two in dark business suits. They sat down on four folding chairs at the back of the crude stage and talked among themselves, ignoring us.

After I'd grown tired of looking at them, I studied the platform. It had been hastily decorated with bunting and a couple of American flags in standards at either end of the stage. A banner hung above: CAPITAL INVESTMENT CORPORATION. Two signs were tacked to the back wall: "Buy a share in the future" and "Invest in America."

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Sure, I thought. *Only what will I use for money?*

But then the man in C.I.C. gray was moving to the lectern at the front of the stage. "Everybody hear me all right?" he said into the mike.

"Hell, yes!" Eckert boomed out beside me.

"Then let's get started. I'm John Bradley, C.I.C. project manager." He half-turned toward the back of the platform. "The tall, distinguished man in the brown suit is Sam Franklin, representative of the U. S. Treasury. We call him Uncle Sam."

We chuckled appreciatively.

"The man built like a wrestler is Carmen Vecchio, general contractor. The Air Force officer is Captain Max Kovac, on loan to us as technical training supervisor and construction manager. You'll hear from the others later—Captain Kovac in particular. But right now it's my turn. I want to tell you something about yourselves. You're one in a hundred."

We listened attentively, caught already in Bradley's swift, sure flow of words.

"Fifty thousand of you filled out applications. One thousand were invited to take physicals. Five hundred of you were accepted. There will be more exams, psychological as well as physical, and the training will be the toughest thing you've ever done. When it's all over, less than half of you will remain."

He paused to let it sink in and then gave us the clincher. "But starting now you are all on salary. Not triple time, understand. That doesn't start until later. But you're on salary until separated."

We gasped and applauded. Me, too. I was up there on my feet, beating my hands together with the rest.

"This is a C.I.C. project," Bradley said seriously, "and from this moment you are C.I.C. employees. We like to think of every C.I.C. man as an ambassador to the public. As such it will be your duty to correct some of the strange ideas about C.I.C. that have achieved common circulation.

"One"—he held up a finger—"C.I.C. is not a relief organization. Two. It is not a government bureau, although the Federal Government is a participant. Three—" He paused and then slammed his hand down on the lectern. "No! I'll tell you, instead, what C.I.C. is. C.I.C. is a profit-making organization set up to invest capital in long-term projects too big to be handled by a single company."

We clapped. We were in a mood to applaud anything.

"Almost every corporation in the country owns stock in C.I.C. Most of them contribute men and facilities upon request. But they don't control C.I.C. Like every other corporation, C.I.C. is controlled by its stockholders. C.I.C.'s motive is the only motive you can trust—the profit motive. We want to make

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money. And C.I.C. is the best long-term investment in the world—outside of the U. S. government, of course."

Over the applause, somebody cheered. Franklin smiled.

"Why is C.I.C. such a good investment?" Bradley seemed to pick out each one of us, asking the question. "Because we invest in brainpower and the facilities for supplying it with the data it needs to work on. We invest in basic science and the technology for applying it. We invest in the future.

"If atomic power had not been discovered, we would be discovering it. Instead, we are adapting it to a multitude of uses, from small powerplants to rocket motors. We are tapping the Earth's internal heat, building tidal hydroelectric systems, working on vast reclamation plans like the Sahara Project, and financing a hundred different scientific explorations into the unknown.

"One of the unescapable facts of this half of the Twentieth Century is that scientific research has grown beyond the resources of the individual scientist, even, sometimes, the individual corporation. Research must be supported by the economy as a whole if we are to provide the essential experimental verification for the insights of our brilliant scientists or new facts about the universe for them to build their theories upon. To supply the means for that research and the climate for that scientific speculation is our job."

I happened to glance at Kendrix. He was grinning sardonically.

"Okay," somebody yelled, "but what are we gonna do?"

"We're going to build an artificial satellite of a thousand uses. For immediate profit: television relay and weather observation. For future profit: zero-atmosphere, zero-gravity, and zero-temperature laboratories for astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology—"

"What's the matter with the Doughnut?" somebody shouted.

The voice was close to me. I looked. It was Kendrix. That surprised me; he had changed his voice.

Bradley tried to locate the man who had shouted and failed. But he smiled easily. "There's nothing the matter with the Doughnut except that it belongs to the Air Force, and it's too small. Its primary function is military, and the other functions have been crowded out. The satellite we're going to build will have ten times the space and one hundred times the convenience.

"There was the S.1.1.—the first manned ship into space; it's still there, and Rev. McMillen's still there, staring out blindly at the stars for all eternity. In the same orbit is the S.1.2.—the Air Force's Doughnut. I'm going to make a prediction. Inside a year, everybody will be calling it the Little Wheel."

Bradley let us seize the meaning

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and make it our own. "Because we're going to build the Big Wheel, the S.2.1—and the television relay stations, S.2.2 and S.2.3, as well. We're going to build the Big Wheel twenty-two thousand miles high where it will race with the turning of the Earth and hang forever above the center of the United States, a new fixed star. Men will guide their airplanes by it, and their ships and their dreams. And we're going to build it—you and I."

We stood, cheering, pounding each other on the back.

Kendrix put his lips close to my ear. "Never trust an economist," he said softly. "Bradley's an economist. The C.I.C. is riddled with them."

What was Kendrix trying to do? I wondered. *Oh, maybe he was right. The C.I.C. wasn't building a satellite just for profits; profits can be picked up quicker and easier. There was some other motive, and I was afraid of hidden motives. That's why I was afraid of Kendrix. What was he getting out of it?*

I distrusted C.I.C. I distrusted Kendrix, too—not because, like Bradley, he said what he didn't believe, but because he didn't believe in anything.

Bradley had introduced Captain Kovac, and Kovac was talking about the training ahead, but I wasn't listening.

I was wondering how Gloria would take it.

III

I TURNED THE key in the lock and pushed, but the door stuck. Things warped here in the dry, desert wind: wood and people. The door had been built of cheap, green wood.

It was distinguished from its neighbors in the long row only by the faded numbers painted on it long ago: 313. I put my shoulder against it. It yielded, complaining querulously.

"Is that you, Bruce?" Gloria called from the kitchen.

"Who were you expecting?"

Gloria came toward me, wiping her soapy hands on the apron that draped her abdomen. "The iceman, silly!" She kissed me firmly and then leaned back to study my face. "Did you get the job?"

Her cheeks were flushed from the heat of the kitchen, and she was still pretty to me after five years of marriage. But the desert and pregnancy hadn't been kind to her. Her skin was dry, and her face was still puffy around the eyes. But I loved her because of or in spite of these things. I didn't know, myself, why I loved her.

"Well?" she asked sharply.

"Yes," I said. "I got it. I'm drawing salary again."

"What is the job?"

"Building a satellite."

But it was no surprise to her. Some feminine grapevine or some intuition of tragedy had already warned her.

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"No," she said flatly. "I won't let you go. You'll have to find something else."

"Don't be silly." My voice, as I heard it, was harsh and unpleasant. "There's no choice."

"Bruce, you can't!" She took a sudden, painful breath. "It would kill me. Stay on here. We don't care about the money—"

I moved my hands impatiently. "Sit down. Try to understand."

She sank down slowly onto the shabby davenport and sat stiffly on the edge, her face obstinate and unhearing with the look I knew too well. I had to make her understand.

"Don't make it any harder for me. It's not the money; it's the job. I can't stay on here." I sat down in the plastic rocker. "The field is finished. They don't need us here any more."

"Then you can get a job somewhere else. I hate the desert."

"Don't make up your mind, Gloria," I pleaded. I looked down at my hands, clenching and unclenching futilely on my knees. "I can't take the chance. This is three hundred a week. Six months of that is almost eight thousand dollars. With eight thousand dollars we could last out the Depression. We wouldn't have to worry."

"Worry!" she said as if the word belonged to her. "What do you know about worry? What makes you think you'll come back alive? Lots of you won't. Space will take them."

"It's dangerous," I admitted. "That's what they're paying for."

"How much is a man's life worth?"

"Not much," I said bitterly. "Not any more."

She put her hand to her breast as if it hurt. "Please don't do this to me. Try to find a job somewhere, anywhere. I'll never ask another thing from you, not for the rest of my life."

"There aren't any jobs. There haven't been any jobs for two years, not since the Crash of Sixty-six. For every job there's a man clinging to it with fear in his eyes. You don't know what insecurity does to a man, how it eats away his courage and dissolves his guts with terror that he'll lose this job, too, that he won't have a roof for his family or food. I've felt the solid ground dissolve beneath me once. I can't ever trust it again." I stared silently at my white knuckles.

"We'll get by somehow."

"Somehow isn't good enough," I said fiercely. "It's got to be certain. I've got responsibilities. I've got to have security. Don't you understand?" Suddenly she was a stranger. "No, you don't understand." My voice dwindled thinly. "If you just hadn't got pregnant—"

"Don't act as if it were all my fault!" she flared.

"Well? If you hadn't forgotten to take the pill—"

"I didn't forget," she shouted. "How many times do I have to tell

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you? It just didn't work. Accidents happen, still." Angry tears rolled down her cheeks.

"If anything should happen to me," I said softly, "there's a ten thousand dollar company policy. That'll take care of you and the baby."

"Money!" she said coldly, staring at me. "Is that all you can think about? You think I want money? And what if you did come back? Crippled, blind, and the constant fear that if we had more children they'd be monsters—"

"No chance of that," I said grimly. "There's a compulsory sterilization provision in the contract."

"If you do this to me," she said in a voice that was starkly quiet, "if you leave me to go out on this job, I won't be here when you come back."

"It's no use," I said, standing up tall. "It's too late. I've already signed the contract."

She leaned back slowly, staring blindly at my face, tears welling in her eyes and trickling silently down her cheeks.

For a moment I stared down at her and then I turned and slammed angrily out of the house.

IV

SOMEHOW LIFE continued, as it has a habit of doing. Neither of us admitted we were wrong; neither of us changed our minds. We didn't refer to the matter again, but there was a quietness in Gloria that made me uneasy.

I carried it with me through the examinations that followed: the insidious probings of psychologists, the mauling of the centrifuge and the decompression chamber, and a hundred other torments of mind and body. I gritted my teeth and endured stoically, thinking of the unbearable alternative, and somehow I got through.

Jock Eckert made it, too, chuckling, laughing, with Gargantuan enjoyemnt. George Hendrix—the Professor—made it, smiling sardonically, superior to everything they could do to him, a surprising, wiry endurance in his lean body. And Clary Calhoun made it, letting his soft, thin body be twisted and torn beyond endurance while he lived inside his dream.

But half of us were gone when the real training began.

It was only distinguishable from the testing by being tougher. Kovac's lean, hard, leathery spaceman's face sneered at us by day, and I carried it into my dreams with me, the eyes speckled with tiny cataracts squinting balefully, the mouth snarling, "This is nothing, you lousy Earthlubbers, nothing to what it's like out there. A cadet has four years to learn this; you've got to have it letter-perfect in three months. You've got to go through these things sailing or space will kill you! Understand? You'll die out there like poor, gasping fish out of water!"

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We sat hour after hour in the giant planetarium and watched the panoramic space films: the unwinking stare of stars, the blazing fierceness of the sun, impossible to look at, the lesser brilliance of the moon, the vast span of Earth, a giant picture framed in a white haze, sunlight glaring from the polar ice or the sea, and everywhere else the deadness of space, a black beyond blacknesses. It was a place of harsh contrasts and savage glares, and sometimes, when the camera twisted or spun, a place of dizzy discomfort.

Afterwards I would have a blinding headache.

"That's nothing!" Kovac shouted. "These films resemble space as a pin-up picture resembles a woman. Space is uglier and deadlier and realer, and the moment you think you know it—you're lost!"

We floated in a pool whose water was heated to indetectable blood temperature. With the lights out, it was like being disembodied. Once, when they anesthesized our inner ears, it was worse. Many of us almost drowned, and a fifth of the men got nauseated. We didn't see them any more.

I came upon Clary, white-faced, huddled over a drain in a hidden corner. "You won't tell on me, will you, Bruce?" he whispered fiercely. "They'll kick me out if they learn. Next time I'll know better; I'll take dramamine."

Slowly I shook my head, recognizing the fear in him that was even greater than my fear of being jobless.

"Wait until you get out there in zero gravity," Kovac raged at us, his face dark with an unreadable passion. "Your senses won't be deadened then. They'll be viciously alive—and the information they give you will be all wrong. Your otolith organs will scream that you're falling and if you shake your head, your semi-circular canals will shout that you're spinning madly . . ."

He paused. "There's no way of describing it. To describe something you need a comparable experience, and there's nothing like it on Earth. Anybody who's afraid, who has any qualms, any doubts—quit now! Get out! Or you'll get out the hard way!" He turned and strode viciously away.

Why is he so angry? I wondered.

The original 512 dwindled to 250, to 200, and dipped below. I endured as I had earlier—because there was no other choice. Jock Eckert went through, flying. Nothing could wipe off George Hendrix's sardonic smile. Clary stuck with grim determination.

There was too much to learn, too much to experience, too much to remember, but I tried, knowing that my life might depend on it. Those of us who remained were divided into crews: basic construction, electrical, steamfitting, and plumbing, rigging, welding, and shipfitting. Jock Eckert became a

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foreman; I was a member of his basic construction crew.

We worked in the suits we would need out there. They were complex, jointed metal monsters whose sleeves were equipped with tools instead of gloves. Inside there were fingertip controls to twist the magnetic screwdriver, to tighten and release the pliers and make them turn, to adjust the wrench ends and rotate them.

Day after day we hauled the massive suits around and practiced assembling the innumerable plastic-and-nylon sections. When they were assembled, we inflated them and attached the metal skin Kovac called a meteor bumper. We installed the shutterlike temperature regulators, the plumbing, the wiring, the solar powerplant, and all the compact, ingenious machinery, instruments, furnishings, and fittings.

We sweated at it until we knew every part by sight and touch, until we had memorized the name and number and location of the smallest section of skin, the most insignificant pipe or wire.

We tested it at five atmospheres pressure, took it apart a final time, packed it away in labeled crates, and stowed the ones marked FIRST WEEK in the freight compartments of ten third-stage rockets. The remainder we stacked in the warehouse, carefully; our lives depended on their reaching us as we needed them, at the right time, in the right order.

Three months—that was our training. Three months to become spacemen. Three months to learn how to build the Big Wheel. And then the practice was over.

One hundred and seventy-eight men waited in the vast gloom of a giant workshed. Here other men had built the ships that would carry us 22,000 miles above the surface of the Earth. The dawn was cold and gray. The men shivered in their thin, one-piece coveralls, tense, quiet, scared and trying not to show it.

I walked toward them across the broad emptiness, dwarfed by the building above me but not thinking about that, intent upon an agony within. I walked into the drifting clot of men, unseeing, uncaring, and then there were 179.

Clary caught my arm. My eyes focused on him. "Did you get her?" he asked.

I shook my head slowly. "I can't understand it. She didn't speak to me this morning. She didn't even look at me. It was like I was already gone."

"You know how women are," Jock said reassuringly. "They get crazy ideas. Leave them alone and they snap out of it. Gloria'll be all right."

I went on unheeding. "It didn't worry me at first. I knew it was rough on her. I figured she wanted to make it easier, she wanted to skip the good-bys. But—why doesn't she answer the telephone?"

"Maybe she went back to bed,"

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Clary suggested, but his mind wasn't really on it. He was thinking about what would happen to him soon, and his voice broke.

"Not Gloria," I said dully. "After she wakes up in the morning, she can't go back to sleep. The kid kicks her, she says. No, she's gone—or she's sitting there in the apartment listening to the phone ring."

"ZERO MINUS THIRTY MINUTES," said a great, metallic voice in the dim heights of the shed. "PASSENGERS READY YOURSELVES FOR LOADING."

"I'm going to try again," I said suddenly.

Clary grabbed my arm again. "You can't. You haven't got time. Here come the trucks now."

Silently they pulled into the shed in single file, drivers black figures of mystery behind the blaze of headlights. The men around me scrambled into the open backs. Slowly I followed, ignoring the hands held down to me.

"ZERO MINUS TWENTY-FIVE MINUTES," blasted the loudspeaker. "CREW MEMBERS TAKE YOUR POSITIONS. PASSENGERS PREPARE TO BOARD SHIP. ALL COUPLINGS WILL BE DISCONNECTED. WORKING PARTIES WITHDRAW FROM THE FIRING AREA."

"Maybe she's having the baby," I said.

Jock clapped me on the shoulder. "Let the doctors worry. They get paid for it."

"Why doesn't she answer the phone?" I muttered.

The trucks rolled out of the shed, one by one, and streamed across the field toward the waiting ships. They stood tall against the sullen, morning sky.

V

THE THIRD-STAGES of five of those ships were home to us for two months while the other five shuttled back and forth with supplies. Two months. It seemed like two years. Two years of hell.

The cramped cabins had been built as control rooms, not living quarters. They had been designed to seat five men and keep them in physical shape to work the ship while it was in flight. They had never been meant to orbit indefinitely in the full blaze of the unveiled sun as a barracks for thirty-seven men.

We stripped the cabin and hung tiers of aluminum-and-canvas bunks on the walls. We ate our condensed, bulkless rations cold and sipped tepid water and took pills; we had digestive troubles and skin troubles and orientation troubles. The only semblance of gravity was when a man pushed away from one wall or caught himself against another.

But the worst was the heat and the humidity. The air conditioning system of the ship could have cooled an eight-story building, but it couldn't keep up with the animal

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heat of thirty-seven men or the radiant heat of the Sun and Earth.

The water absorption system was perpetually overloaded; the humidity never dropped much below 100%. The fans worked constantly, but they only succeeded in keeping us from stifling in our own exhalations. The air we breathed was hot air, wet air, and foul air, thick with the stench of machinery and thirty-seven unwashed men.

And then there was the work, hard, painful, dangerous labor outside in the burning night. We built the Big Wheel in an environment as new and deadly as that suffered by the first sea-creatures left stranded on a primeval shore. There was no venturesomeness about it, no planned assault, no purposeful conquest.

But we were selected by our environment, and we adjusted to it —most of us. Perhaps that is our basic talent: we adjust, and what we can't adjust to, we change.

One of those who did not adjust was Clary Calhoun.

Day after endless day he lay in his bunk, his eyes fixed unmoving on the canvas of the bunk above, his fingers, like white spiders, picking at the webbed belts that kept him from drifting away on the jet propulsion of his uneven breathing. He looked pale and shrunken as I came to him, pulling myself wearily along the metal ladder, and clung to tubular aluminum framework of his bunk.

"Hello, kid," I said cheerily. "We finished section eighteen today. Only eighty-two more to go."

Clary turned his head toward me, his eyes brightening. "Really?" But as he said it, his mouth tightened, his eyes glazed sickly, his hands clutched at the bunk's frame.

"No better?"

Clary held his head rigid. "No." Slowly he unlocked the prison of his muscles; it was a conquest of will that deserved a greater reward. "Every time I move my head, my semi-circular canals scream that I'm spinning madly. It's the Weber-Fechner law, I guess. The less my sense organs are stimulated, the more sensitive they become to changes of stimulation. But the worst part is when I fall asleep— the nightmares, the long, screaming falls through the night—" He stopped and smiled determinedly. "I kept down some soup today."

"That's wonderful, kid," I said proudly. "In a few days you'll be out there with us."

Clary's face quivered before he got it back under control. "No. No. There's no use kidding myself. I've got chronic spacesickness. Kovac is sending me in on the next ship."

"Maybe if I talked to him—"

"What's the use? He's right. I'm just occupying the space an able-bodied man should have, breathing his air, eating his food."

"It's a lousy break. I know what it meant to you."

He stared at my face, seeing it not sunburnt and weary and famil-

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iar but eternally alien. "No, you don't. You can't. No one can. To the rest of you this is just a job, a hard, unpleasant, dangerous job. To me it's the only thing in life worth doing. And I'm the one who's the Earthlubber, who can never be a spaceman. Isn't that a laugh?"

"Nobody's laughing," I said gently. "Wait till you've been down a while. Things will look different. Maybe later, when they get spin on the Wheel, you can come back out."

"I'll never come back." For a moment, he had the eyes of a prophet. "This is all of it, all I'll ever have." He tried to smile. "Section eighteen all done, eh? And it hasn't been quite a week. You'll have the Wheel finished inside three months." He laughed weakly. "Don't work too fast or you'll be out of a job again."

"It can't be too fast."

"You haven't heard from Gloria?" he asked quickly.

"Not a line. Not a word. Nothing."

"No news is good news," Clary said, reassuringly banal. "Anything happened to her, they'd have told you."

"Yeah." I stared past Clary into one of the darker corners, unseeing. I could feel the sweat oozing through my pores and standing out on my face in perfect little spheres. When I shook my head, they would fly away in meteor-straight paths until they hit something and shattered or spread into a thin film on wetable surfaces. Most things in the ship were clammy.

"Any casualties today?" Clary asked.

"Only two—neither of them fatal. One guy was working at the dark side and glanced toward the sun. He's still blind, but the medic thinks it's only temporary. The other moron forgot to rotate out of the sunlight, and his suit couldn't handle the heat. He passed out. The medic called it heat exhaustion." I shook my head; the sweat droplets flew. "They won't learn. This guy, he roasted out there for ten minutes or so before anybody noticed him."

"That's bad. They ought to do something."

"They've got us organized on the buddy principle now. Then every five minutes they call the roll over the ship-to-suit circuit. But no matter what they do, it's a miserable, lousy business. What do they want another satellite for? They got the Doughnut. This thing's a death trap. There's nine men dead already. Twice that many injured."

"The Doughnut isn't enough," Clary said softly. "Not just because it's too small. The Doughnut is Air Force, and the Air Force has got what it wants: command of the Earth. What good to the Air Force are the Moon, Mars, Venus . . . ?"

"What good to anybody?" I said violently.

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"The human spirit—that's what they're good for. Through all the ages of human awareness, they have been there, waiting, an eternal challenge: riddle my meaning, come to me, seize me if you can! Now we have the power and we must accept the challenge—if only because a challenge refused is the beginning of decay. But the challenge accepted is life renewed, life reaffirmed, and the obstacle conquered strengthens Man for the next one, the bigger one.

"But there are more important reasons," Clary went on, his voice scarcely above a whisper. "Man needs a broader viewpoint, a wider horizon. Let him go to meet the universe, and he will find himself reflected in it—not an Earthman with all the narrowness and prejudice of the village mentality, but a Spaceman, a citizen of the universe.

"Wherever Man goes, he meets himself. Out here he will meet a better man, because he can't bring his hatreds and prejudices out with him. They weigh too much. All he can bring is his dreams, the ones that soar. And out here he may find the answers he has sought too long and in vain below."

Clary's voice had faded away to a voiceless whisper. It stopped, and the vision in his eyes died like the glow of sunset before the coming of night. His eyes closed like purple shades.

"Go away, Bruce," he whispered. "I want to dream."

Dream, Spaceman! Your dreams are better than my reality. Farewell.

VI

First we built the Hub, with its landing-berth turrets at either end to receive the sausage-shaped space taxis, and then we built the four spokes out from the Hub. They would provide the only convenient means of moving from one arc of the wheel to another. At the end of each spoke, the plastic-and-nylon sections of the rim began to grow.

The available working area was multiplied by eight. Where at first we could only work a few at a time, there was soon room for everyone, and we could have used more. After the first month replacements began flowing up for the sick, the injured, and the dead. Our construction pace swiftened.

Oddly enough, it was the replacements who complained about the crowded cabins, the monotonous, unpalatable food, the eternal discomfort. They reinfected us, we who had been selected by our environment, who had grown hard and unfeeling to match it.

Kovac had driven us hard. He had driven himself twice as hard, but few of us considered that. He sensed our unrest and called suddenly for a change in the schedule. Whether there was disagreement below I never knew, but the shipments began arriving in a different order.

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The plumbers, the electricians, and the steamfitters turned to their trades. The riggers, the welders, and the shipfitters began sheathing the plastic-and-nylon in thin aluminum plate with a ceramic coating and installing the temperature regulators.

The rest of us worked inside, fixing temporary bunks to the walls and installing the permanent air-conditioning and water-recovery system, although the algae, oxygen-producing, sewage-disposal complex would have to wait until later. Then we put up what we could of the solar powerplant.

Two months after we reached space, we moved into the relative comfort of the partially completed Wheel. At this stage it looked more like a pinwheel waiting to be touched off. In a sense, that was what it was. A big glorified pinwheel!

Such is the nature of men that we looked on our new quarters as very near to heaven. We spread out luxuriously in our assigned eight feet by four feet by four feet—to be shared, of course, with two other men when they were off duty. We crowed, "This is living! Soft, man, mighty soft!"

Expertly, Jock Eckert flipped himself over in the air and growled, "The guys who'll live here when we get it built—they'll have it foamy!"

It wasn't just the extra space, either. The air was better, fresher, less poisonous, most of the water wrung out of it. The heat-control problem was almost licked and there was even a stall, later to be used as a shower, in which we could take sponge baths.

But such is the nature of men that we soon began to complain again. We had reasons. Beside Earth, the Wheel was only a slightly more comfortable circle of Hell.

"Tomorrow," Kovac announced over the makeshift public-address system, and he paused as if he were weighing the consequences, "tomorrow we will apply spin. Foremen will report to my office for instructions."

It was a ticklish job. We all knew it, but we cheered anyway. Spin would mean a return of weight, a simulation of gravity.

But the Wheel hadn't been designed to spin until the rim was completed. The spokes would have to take stresses they were never meant to endure, stresses no designer could have dreamed of.

The plan was to anchor a space taxi at each of the four rim segments. In each taxi an experienced Air Force pilot would apply power slowly, simultaneously, until the rim was rotating once every thirty-two seconds. That would simulate a gravity of one-third Earth-normal at the outermost level of the rim.

Everyone except the coordinators was ordered out of the Wheel during the operation. Unassigned workers hung in space at the end of safety lines snapped to nearby third-stages, watching. At five min-

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ute intervals, with unthinking habit, they hauled themselves into the radiant heat of the flaming circle of the Sun or into the absorptive blackness of shade to help their suits equalize the temperature.

I drifted at the end of a line attached to the Hub. On one side was the Earth, a giant, rounded picture framed in white haze, colorful, dotted with fleecy clouds. On the other, if I shaded my eyes from the Sun and the dazzle along the Wheel, I could make the stars come out of the wavering, black swells of afterimage, unwinking, many colored. But my gaze was on Jock Eckert.

Clinging to a hook-on ring, Jock was tying down a taxi. He tested each of the three lines individually and then the snap catches, yanking the taxi around unmercifully.

"Come on, Jock!" the pilot complained over the ship-to-suit circuit. "Have a heart!"

"If something goes wrong," Eckert growled, "it ain't gonna be on my sector."

But soon there was nothing left to test. The hooks were snapped to the rings, which were integral parts of the aluminum meteor bumper, and Eckert let go. He drifted gently toward me, his safety line curving.

Out of the background mumble of the roll call, a name came clear. "Eckert?"

"Here," Jock said carelessly and flipped on the weak suit-to-suit walkie-talkie circuit. "I hear the mail came while I was in with Kovac."

"Yeah," I said. "Nothing for you."

"Can you beat those skirts!" Jock said in amazement. "Couldn't be faithful if their lives depended on it. When I get back I'll teach 'em a thing or two." He chuckled. "A thing, anyway. Say! Did you hear from Gloria?"

"No, but I submitted my resignation yesterday."

"What did Kovac say?"

"He said C.I.C. had spent twenty thousand dollars on me, and he was holding me to my contract."

"The ugly son!"

"Patterson?" It was the roll call again.

"Yeah."

"Can the chatter out there. Roll call suspended. This will go out on ship-to-suit, too, but that circuit won't be guarded. Everybody ready? Let's go. Taxis will assume the attitude."

A wisp of vapor steamed from our taxi's rear jet. The lines, coiled snakily, straightened behind. On thin, brief jets, the taxi maneuvered into position.

Jock tugged at his safety line easily, turning his suit around so that he could scan the other sectors, guarding his eyes. As he completed the circle, he stopped his spin and muttered. "Okay, okay!"

"At the count, now," said the coordinator, "one-two-three—"

The taxi was at the end of three taut lines. Vapor streamed from its

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rear jet, became tinged with flame. It strained at the weightless but still massive structure. I looked at Jock. Through the dark glass of his faceplate, I could see his eyes intent upon the taxi some thirty long feet away.

Slowly the distance lengthened. The Wheel began to move—

"That lead line," Jock said suddenly. "It's too short. It's putting too much strain on that front plate."

The flame ate deeper into the vapor at the taxi's stern.

"The plate's loosening!" Jock said urgently, "If it goes, the others will go, too. God knows what that would do to the Wheel! Hold everything!" he shouted. "Cut off power!"

"It's no use," I said quickly. "Everybody's on the TBS circuit. They can't hear you."

"They ain't gonna foul up on my sector," Jock growled. He yanked viciously at his safety line and dived toward the incomplete section of rim.

I watched one corner of the plate pull free of its rivets. "Jock!" I yelled. "Don't! You can't do anything!"

"If I can get my line around that hook-on ring, I can lash it to the next one and equalize the strain."

It happened with appalling suddenness. The plate jerked free, snapping malignantly at the end of the line.

It cut into Jock's suit like a hot knife through butter.

VII

CAPTAIN MAX KOVAC stood just inside the narrow doorway to our compartment, his legs spread against the unaccustomed sensation of weight, his dark face and speckled eyes unreadable. He said without inflection, "Eckert himself was untouched, but he was minutes dead before help could reach him."

"What killed him?" someone asked sullenly.

"No air. His brain cells starved for oxygen," Kovac said explicitly, as if there were a kind of expiation in stressing the details. "His body fluids evaporated in the near vacuum."

I lay in my bunk, feeling weight like an ache in my bones, and the funny part was that the canvas and aluminum below seemed to be pushing me upward.

"He's dead," I said wearily. "What's the use of talking about it?"

Kovac looked at me coldly. "Luckily the Wheel took little damage. We can get back to work on the next shift."

"This satellite of yours has killed twenty-three of us already," I said. "Aren't you satisfied?"

His eyes burned at me. "You think I haven't died with each one of them? I tried to make you understand—" He broke off. "It's not my satellite. It's yours. My job is to help you build it, and I'll never be satisfied until it's built."

"This damn killer ain't worth

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the life of one man like Jock Eckert!" someone shouted behind me.

There was a low grumble of agreement.

"Suppose we should decide we don't want to finish this contraption?" a sly voice chimed in.

"You signed up to do a job." Kovac's voice was harsh and metallic. "You're going to do it!"

"Make us!" someone yelled. "We got a right to quit if we want to. That's in the Constitution!"

"It isn't. And if it were—the Constitution ends with the atmosphere. Up here you'll work or else!"

"Or else what, Captain?" asked the sly voice.

"Or else you won't eat."

"That's silly, Captain. There's only five of you rocket boys. You can't make us work or keep us from eating, not two hundred of us."

"Don't talk like a fool!" Kovac said contemptuously. "You aren't on Earth, and you can't get back in without a perfectly functioning piece of machinery under you. You're here until your job is finished or I send you in."

"Now, Captain," the sly voice continued, "who's talking like a fool? If we should take over and radio in for help, how long could C.I.C. hold out?"

"You've got contracts. Break them and you'll be sued."

"All of us? Nuts! How far would C.I.C. get when a jury heard what we went through?"

Kovac looked at us as if he had turned over a rock and we had crawled out. "If you'd read those contracts," he said softly, "you'd realize that any organized disobedience above the one hundred twenty mile limit is mutiny. It will be treated as such. You said that there were only five of us. Right. But we're armed, and we'll shoot.

"I want you to think what a few bullets would do to this glorified balloon. And you might consider this: you've lost twenty-three men, but the worst is behind you and the casualties will be light from here in. Mutiny and there'll be more than twenty-three of you dead before it's over."

He faced us barehanded, as if it was beneath him to draw a gun, and stared us down. We moved restlessly under that unrelenting pressure. And then he turned quickly, stepped through the doorway, and slammed the airtight door.

No one moved for a moment, and then a big steamfitter rushed to the door. He jerked at the handle. He spun, rage and fear struggling for the battlefield of his face.

"It's locked," he said hoarsely.

"He can't do that!" someone shouted.

"We might get holed by a meteor!" another voice suggested. "We'd die in here, trapped!"

"Let's break through!"

A clot of them surged toward the bulkhead. I sat up.

"Wait a minute!" George Kendrix said. Everyone heard his low,

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trained voice. They stopped, not because they liked him, not because they respected him, but caught by his voice and the warning implicit in it. "You'll die quicker if you break that bulkhead. By now Kovac has evacuated the air from the next compartment."

They stared at Kendrix's lean, sardonic face and slowly drifted back. "What are we gonna do?" one of them asked helplessly.

"He can't starve us," Kendrix said carelessly. "And to feed us, he'll have to open that door again."

"He can pipe in anesthetic gas through the air-conditioning system," I suggested.

Kendrix shrugged. "What good will that do? He can't make us work, not if we don't want to. He talks about mutiny, but he can't shoot us or kill us, not if we don't attempt violence. Passive resistance, my friends, is the answer to Captain Kovac's ultimatum."

I lay back in my bunk. "Fine," I said. "That's just fine. What use is the Wheel, anyway?"

Kendrix rose lightly to his feet and let his malicious eyes rest on me. "What use? All the use in the world, Patterson. C.I.C. is fulfilling its function."

"What do you mean by that?"

"This is the greatest relief project of all time. I thought everybody knew that. We're out here to revive the economy. W.P.A. in the sky!"

The implications of Kendrix's statements were too much for us. If he was right, all the casualties, all the torment, all the sacrifices had been in vain. It had been nothing but a relief project!

"Shut up, Professor!" someone yelled.

"You're crazy!" shouted another one.

"If I thought that was the truth," I said slowly, "if I thought everything we'd given up, everything we'd suffered was for nothing but a—"

"What would you do?" Kendrix asked eagerly, bouncing on the balls of his feet, studying me. Then his lip curled and his face darkened with disappointment. "Nothing. That's what you'd do. What could you do? This is a legitimate enterprise. You knew what you were getting into when you signed your contract, the discomforts, the danger. Eckert knew, too."

A blond boy with a violent case of sunburn leaned over a top bunk. "You don't know what you're talking about, Professor. There's less than two hundred of us out here. What kind of relief project is that?"

Kendrix grinned at this new target. "You feel lonely, do you? Why, boy, for every man up here there are fifty thousand men at work below, making the rocketships that carry him, the fuel that powers them, the oxygen he breathes, growing and processing the food he eats, building his suits and his satellite, and all the countless, expensive things necessary to create an Earth-type environment in the

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hot-and-cold vacuum of space. You're sitting up here on top of a pyramid of human effort. You're the excuse for it all."

"You got it wrong, Professor," the boy said quickly. "The Big Wheel—it's the excuse for it all."

"Of course," Kendrix agreed readily. "The essential Grail. The philosopher's stone. No one found either one of them, but the search was invaluable. The experiments of the alchemists, for instance, led directly to all the miracles of modern chemistry. And now the Big Wheel, the biggest and brightest Grail of all. Grails aren't ends but goals. Men can't be pushed; they must be led. And they must have a real moral excuse for even the most obvious necessity."

"Aw, shut up!" said a brawny riveter on the edge of his bunk. "Let us get some sleep. There might be action tomorrow."

"There speaks humanity!" Kendrix cried, pointing. "Listen to it snore! Don't disturb it with truths. Like an angry bear, it will smash the man who wakes it. Sleep, my friend. Sleep on. When the world collapses around you, sleep, sleep . . ."

"Who said the world was collapsing?" I demanded.

"I said." Kendrix turned his dark eyes back to me. "What would you call the Depression of nineteen sixty-six, my friend? Human society is unable to harness its own energies, unable to consume its own abundance. It must divert the flood lest it drown in it. And the great tragedy is that the waters always return multiplied. Our fertility has caught up with us. Not the fertility of the neo-Malthusians but the infinitely more dangerous fertility of the human mind."

I stared at him, not understanding half of what he said. "If they were picking relief projects, they could pick better ones than this," I said defiantly.

"Could they? For how many highways can we find the smallest excuse? How many dams can we build before we run out of worthwhile rivers and a market for the power? How many schools can we construct, even as far behind as we were? A lot, I grant you. But not enough. What's more, these are construction jobs, and they employ only skilled labor. What about the rest of us? More important: highways pay for themselves, dams return the investment many times, and schools—why, schools are the biggest moneymakers of all!"

"Well, why shouldn't they make money?" I demanded.

The men who were on their feet had drifted into a ring about Kendrix, their faces intent and serious. The men who had lain down were sitting up again.

"Isn't that what C.I.C. is for," I asked, "to invest capital in promising projects, to make profits out of them?"

"C.I.C., Patterson," Kendrix said gravely, "is democracy's answer to an uncontrollable economy. When

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automation caught up with us, when the Doughnut made weather ninety-nine percent predictable and increased farm production by half, when the Doughnut's orbital missiles with their atomic warheads made aggressive war an impossibility, suddenly we were buried in our wealth. C.I.C.? I'll tell you what C.I.C. is. C.I.C. is a shovel for tossing our surpluses out into space."

From a distant bunk someone shouted, "What are you, mister, a Communist?"

Kendrix turned and found the man. "The ultimate refutation of the unanswerable! No, my friend, I'm no Communist. As bad as our economy is, it is still far better than the over-controlled economies; they can only produce shortages. If I must choose, I'd rather die from gluttony than from starvation. To produce, man needs an incentive; but give him one, and he will overproduce. The only middle ground is when the economy is passing from one state to the other.

"Is there an answer?" Kendrix seemed to be asking the question of himself. "Surely there is an answer, some meeting place for control and enterprise—"

He broke off and looked at us again, sneering. "Technological knowledge has increased at a fantastic goemetrical progression during the last sixty years, multiplying productive power ten times every generation. We didn't even recognize the problem. The surpluses flowed down the sewers of two world wars and preparations for a third.

"The Doughnut closed those sewers, and our surpluses had nowhere to go. We weren't prepared for the flood, and we almost drowned before we could reach air. Now comes C.I.C. with an investment it hopes will dipose of a major part of our surpluses for decades to come: the conquest of space!"

My hands tightened on the bunk's aluminum frame. "It doesn't add up. If that's C.I.C.'s only purpose, it would be easier and simpler to throw the stuff away, burn it up, plow it under . . ."

"Never!" Kendrix said sardonically. "Or, rather, not again. We tried that in the last great depression, and the psychological reaction was disastrous. You heard the gentleman back there! Let him sleep, he said. Don't make him face the fact that he can conquer space but not his own economic system. Don't make him puzzle over the paradox of starving people and burning potatoes. If mankind is to rid itself of its surpluses, it must be for a worthy cause. This time it is a crusade against space itself.

"The eternal tragedy, as C.I.C. will discover, is that these facilities we are building, even the effort of building the Wheel itself, will lead to new discoveries and better ways of doing things that will intensify the problem. There will be

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no breathing space in which man can discover the inner workings of his own economy rather than the secrets of space flight or of the universe itself."

Kendrix turned on us a look of magnificent triumph. "And we poor suckers—why, we're the crusaders, the shock troops of this mighty human army launched against the heavens. We're expected to take a few losses. That's our function. That's why we're paid triple-time."

"We don't have to stop here," the boy in the top bunk said stubbornly. "We can keep on going out—to the planets and the stars beyond. That way we'd stay ahead of our surpluses."

I recognized that the boy had accepted Kendrix's argument as the truth.

"Somehow," Kendrix said ironically, "man will find a profit even in that."

Somebody laughed sheepishly.

Then there was silence, and I realized, suddenly, that the mutiny was over. Kendrix had done it. Why he had done it, I did not know, but I knew that he had done it consciously and that it hurt. He had sacrificed his cherished concept of economic man upon the altar of man's necessity. From this moment forward, he would have to think of whole man, not some easy, fractionated stereotype.

He had held a mirror up in front of us, he had showed us ourselves as we really were, and the self-righteous foundation of our anger had crumbled away.

We were going to finish the Big Wheel.

VIII

I LIMPED UP to the door in the row of plasterboard-and-tarpaper apartments and read the faded number on the door: 313. Walking was a weary thing. I leaned against the door jamb for a moment, gathering strength, and then I knocked.

The door still stuck. It squealed open after a minute, and a man stood in the doorway, an undershirt sticking sweatily to his chest. He stared at me without friendliness. "Yeah?"

I winced.

I knew what he was seeing. A man who limped. A man with a face deeply tanned but with an unhealthy look to it. A man with oddly speckled eyes.

"A Mrs. Gloria Patterson lived here six months ago," I said. "Do you know where she is now?"

"We moved in six months ago," the man said curtly. "Nobody here then. We never heard of her."

"She had a baby," I said. "A boy. She didn't leave a forwarding address?"

"If she lived here before we did, she didn't even leave a coat hanger." He started to turn away and hesitated as if humanity still had a claim on him. "Why don't you ask at the business office?"

"I did."

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"If she had a baby, how about the hospital?"

"I just came from there."

He pulled the door toward him. "Well, I guess there ain't anything I can do."

I turned away. "No, I guess not."

I limped down the graveled walk. Behind me the man called out, "If you want to leave your name in case we should hear anything—"

But I didn't turn back. I walked heavily toward the little, covered shack where the bus stopped.

The ticket seller in the dusty bus station frowned at me impatiently. "A blond-haired woman with a baby? Mister, I get four or five like that every week. How do you expect me to remember a particular one over six months ago? For all you know she may have taken a plane."

I leaned wearily against the counter ledge and shook my head. "She was always afraid to fly. She'd take the bus. She didn't have a car, and the bus is the only other way."

The ticket seller grinned suddenly. "Unless you go straight up. They do that from around here, you know."

"I know."

"Look, buddy," the ticket seller said kindly, "take it from me, you'll never get anywhere asking people what happened six months ago. This woman—she must have come from some other town; there's no natives here. She must have folks somewhere or friends. Why don't you try there? A woman with a little baby has it tough. She can't work and care for the baby both."

"Maybe you're right. When's the next bus out?"

"Where to?"

I hesitated. "East."

"An hour and a half. There's a bar across the way, you want to wait."

"Thanks." I turned and limped toward the door.

"And, mister," the ticket seller said, "I hope you find her and she takes you back."

I didn't answer. Gloria hadn't gone back to her home town, not unless her sister had lied to me. But I'd try it. Maybe her sister had lied. I hobbled slowly into the bar.

The bartender slid the schooner of beer across the bar. "Here, fellow," he said sympathetically. "You look like you could use it."

"Thanks," I said. The air-conditioned bar was cool and dark after the desert heat. Sweat welled out on my face as I lifted the glass.

"You look like you been out in the sun lately," the bartender said idly, making conversation.

"Yeah." I took a sip and shuddered. The flavor was too sharp. I set the glass down and made rings in the condensed moisture on the bar. They looked like wheels.

"As I was saying, thank God for the boys who built the Big Wheel!" It came in a loud, brash salesman's voice on my left.

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I swung around viciously, and the man, in the act of tucking in his zipper, jumped back, surprised.

"Wh-what's the matter?" he stammered.

"Sorry," I muttered. "You came up on my blind side." He'd been in the men's room.

"Say! You gave me a start, there. Thought you were going to jump me." He looked at me, bloodshot eyes half hostile.

He picked up his highball glass and wandered over to the garish jukebox in the corner. He dropped in a coin and selected a record. As he came back, he said to the bartender, "I guess business has been good around here, what with construction and everything. Well, it's picked up all over. By God, things are almost as good as they ever were."

The record started playing. The melody was familiar, somehow, but I couldn't quite identify it.

"It's confidence," the salesman was saying. "That's what it is. It's faith in the economy. Women are getting pregnant again. I'll tell you frankly, Mac, I was scared there for a while. I sell baby food, see? I was getting afraid I'd have to eat it myself. That's why I say, 'Thank God for the boys who built the Big Wheel!' They're the boys who showed this country that there's nothing to be afraid of."

The song was full of sound effects, swishings and zoomings, but suddenly they faded and a chorus of voices rode clear and strong:

". . . the Big Wheel run by faith
The Little Wheel run by the grace of God,
Brave men built the Wheel,
Wheel in the middle of the air . . ."

"I hear it wasn't all beer and skittles out there," the bartender said.

"It's always tough out in front," the salesman said briskly. "But they got paid good. And they got something better than that. They can tell their kids and their kids' kids that they helped build the Big Wheel. If I'd been a few years younger, I'd have been up there myself, I can tell you. Think of being able to say that: 'I helped build the Big Wheel!' "

"It took a lot of hard work," the bartender offered.

"You bet it did," the salesman agreed warmly. "Hard work and plenty of it, that's what it takes to do anything worth doing. Yes, sir! My hat's off to those men who had the guts to go out there and make their dreams a reality."

He leaned confidentially over the bar. "Frankly, though, I think things are slowing down a bit now. The big construction's over, you know. Well, they're talking about trips to Mars and Venus. They can't start too soon. That's how I feel about it."

I got up and limped toward the door.

"Hey, mister," said the barten-

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der, "you didn't finish your beer."

But I didn't look back. I went through the revolving door into the desert, hearing the juke box singing about inspiration, courage, purpose, and fortitude. When you're discouraged, it said, when the job seems too much for you—

"Look up and see the Wheel
Way up in the middle of the air . . ."

But that wasn't the way it was. And the funny part was that if someone asked me I couldn't tell them the way it was.

There were no words for it. If I had to say something about the way we built the Big Wheel, I would say:

There were four men. One was a dreamer, and he found that dreams weren't enough. One was a construction man; to him it was just another job, but it was his last one. One was an educated man, and he learned that people are more important than theories. And one was afraid, and he discovered that there is no security, no way to be free of fear, nothing worth doing if there is not love.

And there are no reasons for loving.

We went out to build the Big Wheel for all the wrong reasons and we found there all the wrong things. But perhaps it didn't matter. I would think about that, and someday I might be able to believe that it didn't matter, that the only thing that mattered was being men.

On that day, perhaps, I would be glad that I had helped, that I had been a part of it, that I had built the Big Wheel.

But now I was a man alone, and it hurt.

The bus was already in front of the station, its paint blistered and sandblasted. People were getting out of it, out of the coolness into the desert heat.

I hurried, swinging my stiff leg. Suddenly I stopped.

A woman had climbed down, a baby clutched in her arms. No, not a baby. A boy, his head held up, his eyes curious, less than a year old—six months, perhaps—but a boy still, unmistakably.

The woman was blonde, and I knew her face. I knew it very well.

It figured, I guess. She had read about our return, those of us who were left, or she had counted the days, six months of them.

She had learned something, too, those six months, and she had come back to meet me. This time we would be smarter, I thought, knowing that we would not be, that we would be human and erring and bitter, but knowing, too, that what we had was more important than injured feelings and the things that a man must do and those a woman must do.

"Gloria!" I yelled.

She looked up, and I started to run, forgetting my leg, forgetting everything but the need to be with her, to hold her close once more.

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when i grow up

by . . . Richard E. Lowe

The two professors couldn't agree on the fundamentals of child behavior. But that was before they met little Herbux!

THE UNIVERSITY sprawled casually, unashamed of its disordered ranks, over a hundred thousand acres of grassy, rolling countryside. It was the year A.D. 3896, and the vast assemblage of schools and colleges and laboratories had been growing on this site for more than two thousand years.

It had survived political and industrial revolutions, local insurrections, global, inter-terrestrial and nuclear wars, and it had become the acknowledged center of learning for the entire known universe.

No subject was too small to escape attention at the University. None was too large to be attacked by the fearless, probing fingers of curiosity, or to in any way over-awe students and teachers in this great institution of learning.

No book was ever closed in the University and no clue, however tiny, was discarded as useless in the ceaseless search for knowledge which was the University's prime and overriding goal.

For no matter how fast and far the spaceships might fly, or what strange creatures might be brought back across the great curve of the

A good many science fiction writers seem determined to depict children as little monsters. Not all children perhaps, and not with completely merciless regularity. But often enough to make us shudder. Only Richard Lowe remains independent. The youngster of this story isn't a child monster at all. He's just—a "destructor." And that in itself is somehow unimaginably terrifying!

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universe or how deeply the past was resurrected or the future probed, of one thing only was the University quite sure—*man did not know enough.*

All manner of schools had come into being at the University, and often they functioned in pairs, one devoted to proving a proposition, and the other to disproving it. And among these pairs of schools two, in particular, seemed to exist on a most tenuous basis. Their avowed mission was to settle the age-old argument concerning the relative influences of heredity and environment.

One, headed by Professor Miltcheck von Possenfeller, worked tirelessly to prove that there was no such determining factor as heredity, and that environment alone was the governing influence in human behavior.

The other, under the direction of Dr. Arthur D. Smithlawn, was dedicated to the task of proving that environment meant nothing, and that only heredity was important.

Success, in short, could only come to those who were born with the genes of success in their bodies, and failure was as preordained for the rest as was ultimate death for all.

Over a period of more than two hundred years the School of Environment had been taking babies from among the thousands of homeless waifs gathered in throughout the universe, and raising them carefully in a closely supervised, cultural atmosphere.

The School of Heredity, on the other hand, was more select. Its pupils came only from families whose genealogy could be traced back for at least a thousand years. Freedom of choice and expression was the rule here, since the school was attempting to prove that a child's inherited tendencies will send it inevitably along a predetermined path, completely uninfluenced by outside help or hindrance.

In two centuries neither school had been able to develop an overpowering case in support of its own theory. Hence they both thrived, and cheerfully ignored the discrepancies which existed in the case records of individuals who had not turned out according to the book.

Although they were zealous professional rivals, Prof. von Possenfeller and Dr. Smithlawn were devoted personal friends. They called each other Possy and Smithy and got together once a week to play chess and exchange views on the universe in general. Only one subject was taboo between them—their experimental work.

On this particular Saturday night, however, Smithy noticed that his good friend Possy was terribly agitated and disturbed, and had for the third time carelessly put his queen in jeopardy.

"My dear friend," exclaimed Possy, blindly moving his king into check. "Could you possibly be per-

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suaded to ignore for the moment our ban on professional talk? There is something—"

Smithy, secretly, was only too anxious to talk at great length. But he pretended to give the request serious consideration.

"If it is really important," he said. "Yes, by all means. Go right ahead."

"Smithy," Possy plunged on, "I am nonplussed. I am really, terribly disturbed. I've never felt like this before."

Smithy waited patiently while Possy poured himself a large brandy and soda, hastily gulped it down, and made a face as he regretted the action.

"How much do you know about our methods of working in the School of Environment?" the professor asked, taking a new tack.

"Nothing, of course," replied Smithy. The statement was not precisely true, but Smithy was not yet ready to confess that he had spies in his friend's school.

"Well, then," said Possy, knowing full well that Smithy had been getting reports on his college for many years, and feeling secretly glad that he, in turn, had been spying

"Well, then," he repeated, "you should be aware that we know *absolutely nothing* about the children we enroll. Most of them are infants. We do not know who their parents were, or where they were born. Except for the obvious clues which their bodies furnish, we do not even know their national or racial origins.

"We bring them up with absolutely equal treatment—the finest of everything. At the age of five we divide them arbitrarily into classes and begin training them for occupations. Some we educate as scholars, some laborers, some professional men. In me, dear friend, you see one of the triumphs of our methods. I myself was a foundling—raised and educated in the School of Environment. Whatever I may be, I owe to the School."

He paused to give Smithy a chance to digest the statement.

"Of course," Possy continued, "we take into consideration such factors as physical build and muscular development. We don't train undersized boys to be freight handlers. But in general the division is arbitrary. And you'd be amazed how they respond to it. To keep a check on things, we interview our students twice a year to see how much they have learned.

"We always ask them what they want to be when they grow up. That enables us to determine whether or not the training is really taking hold. Occasionally, it is true, we find a case where the schooling seems to run counter to natural aptitudes—"

Smithy could not resist interrupting. "Natural aptitudes? I am surprised to hear you use such an expression. I thought you furnished your students with aptitudes

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through environmental conditioning."

Stiffly, Possy retorted, "Sometime we will have a full, objective discussion of the matter. It is not pertinent at this moment. Of course I believed in natural, or instinctive aptitudes. But I do not believe that they are inherited from parents or even from remote ancestors."

"Cosmic rays, perhaps," needled Smithy, and became instantly sorry when his friend's face began to redden. Possy didn't believe in cosmic rays, obviously. Smithy apologized.

Possy sighed deeply and made a fresh start. "My friend," he said, "in your work, as I understand it, you learn everything you can about a student's past—and about his progenitors. By so doing you hope to be able to predict his future abilities, his likes and dislikes. But what course do you pursue when you find a boy who just doesn't prove out according to the prognostications?"

Smithy mumbled a few evasive words in reply, but refused to be drawn into giving a positive answer.

"Never mind," Possy said. "What would you say if you asked a boy what he liked, or what he wanted to do and his answer concerned something that never existed, or had never been dreamed of? Something horrible."

Smithy's eyebrows perked up. He made no attempt to conceal the fact that his interest had been aroused.

"What, precisely, do you mean?" he demanded.

"Just this," Possy said, leaning forward to give emphasis to his words. "We have a boy who is being trained as a space navigator. He is very bright. He is of medium build, as a spaceman must be, and he learns easily and willingly. We are sure now that he will be ready for pre-space school two years before he reaches the minimum age. Yet, whenever this boy is asked what he wants to do, he replies, 'I want to be a Destructor.' "

Smithy's lips parted. But for a moment he remained completely silent while his mind stumbled over the strange term.

"Destructor?" he repeated, at last.

"Wait," said Possy, "and listen carefully. This boy is now ten years old. He first gave me that answer three days ago. He repeated it two days ago, then yesterday and again today. I had never interviewed him before. I never interview a student personally until the tenth year—so I quite naturally had his files doublechecked. Smithy, he's been giving the same answer ever since he was five years old. Two interviews a year for six years—and three extra ones this week! Imagine! Fifteen times this boy has said he wants to be a Destructor—and no one even knows what a Destructor is."

"Well," Smithy said with a

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shrug, convinced that Possy was getting all excited over nothing, "I admit it seems strange—and highly singleminded for so young a boy. But don't you imagine it's some word he just made up?"

"I admitted that as a possibility until this morning. But look here."

Possy reached behind his chair and took up a small leather bag. Slowly he unzipped it and delved inside. Then, with a grim flourish, he brought forth the body of a cat.

As Smithy's eyes widened, Possy said dramatically: "Smithy, that boy killed this cat with a *glance.*"

"With a—a what?"

"A glance! You heard me correctly. He just looked at the cat, and the beast dropped dead. And he did it to other things, too—a sparrow, a baby fox. Why, he even did it to a rat that had been cornered by this very cat.

"I tell you, I had never been so shaken by anything in all my life. I said to myself, 'Possy, have you got yourself a mutant?' 'No,' I replied. 'He's completely normal in every respect, physically and otherwise. He's a bit brighter than average, perhaps—ninety-eight six in his studies, including elementary astro-physics. He speaks brilliantly, composes poetry, even invents little gadgets. He's a genius, maybe, but not mutant.' Then I asked myself, 'how do you account for the cat?' "

Possy paused, inferentially transferring the question to his friend.

"I can't account for the cat," Smithy said. "Unless we assume its death was a coincidence. But I confess you've aroused my curiosity. Could I see and talk to this boy who wants to be a—" he grimaced—"a Destructor?"

"I'm glad you asked." Possy sighed with relief. "Actually he is outside now, waiting to join us. But I must warn you that you'll find him quite precocious. However, he's extremely amenable."

Possy went quickly to the door, opened it and called, "Herbux, come in."

The boy entered. He was, Smithy observed, a quite ordinary looking boy. He was so obviously ten years old that you couldn't say he was either old or young, large or small, fat or thin or anything else, "for his age." He was just ten years old and a boy.

"Herbux," said Possy, "I want you to meet a friend of mine—the famous Dr. Smithlawn."

"How do you do, sir," Herbux said politely.

"How do *you* do," returned Smithy. He had already decided not to be patronizing, but to take a bold, frank, comradely course with the lad.

"Herbux," he said, "Professor von Possenfeller has been telling me the story of your life. Now you tell me, Herbux. Not *what* you want to be when you grow up, but *why.*"

"I don't know why, sir," Herbux replied easily. "I only know that I want to be a Destructor."

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"But, Herbux what *is* a Destructor?"

Herbux looked around the room. He saw Smithy's birdcage, walked over to it and stared for a moment quietly at Dicky, the doctor's parakeet.

Dicky looked back, chirped angrily twice and toppled from his perch. He landed on his back, his tiny feet rigid and unmoving. He was quite dead, Smithy observed, with a sudden, detached, unbelieving horror. Why, Dicky was seven years old and he had been as good a pet as any lonely old professor could have desired as a cheery avian companion.

"Look here, young man," he began sternly. Then, as the shock passed, he hastily changed his tone. Suppose this child *did* have some strange sort of power—mystic perhaps, but definitely abnormal. He may belong in the School of the Future, Smithy thought. Or perhaps in the School of the Past—the Dark Ages Department. But not here!

"Don't worry, sir," Herbux said. "I can't do it to you."

"But—do *what?*" Smithy cried. "What did you do?"

"I destructed."

Smithy took a deep breath. He felt as though a cruel hoax had been played on him. After all, Possy could have lied about the cat and the other creatures. And the boy was quite obviously bright enough to learn lines and play a part. But how explain Dicky?

He tried to calculate the coincidental odds that might have caused Dicky to die a natural death at one precise instant in time under unusual and exact circumstances. They proved to be incalculable to his unmathematical brain. He rubbed his face with the palms of both hands. Then he turned abruptly to Possy.

"I just don't know what to say about it," he explained. "How *could* I know? How could anybody know?"

He faced the boy again. "Look here, Herbux. This—this power of yours. When did you first notice you had it?"

"Last year, sir. I always knew I would do it sometime. But one day I was looking at a bird perched on my windowsill, and it fell over dead, just as your parakeet did. I thought it was an accident or a coincidence. But then the next day it happened again—with a squirrel. Soon I got to where I could do it on purpose. But I don't know how."

"Well, how do you *feel* about it? Do you *want* to kill these harmless pets?"

"Oh, no, sir. I don't want to *kill* them. I just want to be a Destructor."

Smithy had a sudden, disquieting conviction that he was in the presence of some completely alien, dangerous being. A cold breeze seemed to shiver through the room, though he knew that his quarters were airtight and perfectly ventilat-

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ed. *This is ridiculous,* he told himself, turning to Possy with a helpless shrug. To feel like this over such a nice looking young lad . . .

"My friend," he said, "all this has occurred so suddenly I must have time to think. Such a thing could never have happened in *my* school. Perhaps you should—but doubtless it has already occurred to you—turn him over to physio-psychological rebuilding?"

Possy nodded. "It has, of course. But then I said to myself, 'Possy, they are a bunch of dunderheaded old fossils over there. They can take a criminal and tear him apart and make a good citizen out of him, granted. But do they find out *why* he was a criminal? Have they reduced the number of new criminals? No. And they would not find out why this boy wants to be a Destructor—nor even what a Destructor is.'

"'You're right,' I told myself. 'And besides, Herbux is a nice boy. Why, with this power of his—if he *wanted* to do harm—there wouldn't be an animal left alive around the whole University. And if he could do it to people he's had many an opportunity to practice on me. But has he? No, not once. Besides, if you keep him in school, you can maintain a good close watch over him. Herbux has promised to keep me fully informed as to the progress of his strange power. If he feels it getting stronger, he will let me know immediately.' Isn't that right, Herbux?"

"Yes, sir," said the boy quietly.

"You are quite sure," Smithy asked, "that you know absolutely nothing about this boy's past? His parents, his birthplace—anything at all? There must be *some* clue."

"You know very well I don't," Possy retorted angrily.

"I just thought that perhaps you might have subjected him to hypno-research," Smithy said, placatingly.

"I wouldn't dream of such a thing—" Possy began—and stopped with a gasp. "How did you know about that?" he demanded.

Smithy was flustered. "I—well, that is—" He could think of no convincing answer. Hypno-research was one of Possy's most secret projects. He had used it constantly in his efforts to determine reasons for non-conformity to set patterns of behavior in some of his more recalcitrant students. He had kept it a secret because it added up to an admission that perhaps heredity could play a part in the development of a student's character.

"Smithy, my dear old friend," he said with mock humility. "This is no time for us to quarrel. Let us face the facts candidly. You have been spying on my school—and I in turn have been spying on yours. I know, for instance, that when your students don't behave the way their heredity charts predict you often use hypno-therapy to change their thought-lines, and force them to conform. Is that any less fair than what I do?"

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Smithy sighed. "I guess not, my friend. No, wait. I will go farther than that. It is not a matter of guessing. I am quite certain about it. We are a couple of aging frauds, struggling selfishly along, playing with the lives of these children solely to keep our jobs. Perhaps we should—"

"Nevertheless, we have a problem," interrupted Possy. "It's a problem that won't be solved by our becoming senile idiots. Get your mind back on Herbux, and help me. I feel this is a most desperate situation. If it gets beyond just the two of us, we are likely to be thoroughly investigated. Then goodness knows what would happen."

"But why? The child can do no real harm. Suppose he does 'destruct' an animal or two? There are plenty more. And sooner or later they would die of natural causes, anyway. And it's unthinkable that he could ever do it to—to people . . ."

Smithy paused, obviously struck by a startling thought. He turned to Herbux. "Boy," he said, quite sternly. "Come here."

Herbux obeyed, advancing to within a foot of the old doctor and facing him squarely.

"Look me in the eyes," Smithy commanded.

Questioningly, Herbux began to stare at Smithy.

"Well," Smithy said, after a time, "turn it on."

A set look came over Herbux's face. His lips were compressed and a thin dew of sweat had broken out on his forehead.

Possy stood aghast, slowly comprehending what his old friend Smithy was doing. He was actually risking his life—or so he believed—to prove that the child could not destruct a human being. He wanted to stop the boy, but he could not move from where he stood.

Suddenly Herbux broke and turned away. He began to sob.

"It's no use!" he cried. "I can't do it. I just can't do it . . ."

Smithy went to him and put an arm on his shoulders.

"Tell me, boy," he exclaimed. "What do you mean? Do you mean that you can't *bring yourself* to do it, or that it is physically impossible?"

Herbux just stood there, his head bowed, crying wildly.

"I just can't do it," he repeated, sounding now completely heartbroken.

Possy, coming alive again, said soothingly, "Don't cry, son. It's not bad. It's good, that you can't do it."

Herbux whirled around, facing Possy, his face inflamed with a sudden rage.

"But I will," he screamed, "I will do it! I will! *When I grow up!*"

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quiz game

by . . . Eric Frank Russell

It's never easy for a Mally to masquerade as an Earthman. He must have superior cunning and a real flair for basic English!

HE PAUSED a moment at the top of the big ship's ramp and had his first look at Earth. So this was the fabulous planet, the governing world of six hundred other worlds, the Eldorado of the cosmos. Well, what he could see of it looked good, plenty good. He was going to sneak into it and stay in despite their disapproval.

Of course, they'd try to stop him in the same way they'd stopped many others of his kind. Here, they didn't want Malleables from the far frontiers of empire. They had barred the world to them, in effect placing over every entrance an invisible but vivid sign reading: MALLIES — KEEP OUT!

Earthlings had their reasons. For instance, they believed that every individual should get by on his merits and therefore they objected to the way in which every Mally favored other Mallies.

"Let a Mally get the chance to hire and fire," they'd say, "and he'll shove our kind out to get his own kind in." In addition, they did not like Mally fecundity. "Give them a foothold and they'll breed like flies."

Perhaps alone among modern science fantasy writers Eric Frank Russell can make us believe in the unknown without a single "if" "why" or "but"—at least while we are under the spell of his remarkable stories. But here the spell is so immediate and direct we find ourselves actually inside an alien entity, being hustled down the gangplank of a starship, and roasted to a philological crisp!

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Yes, down there they were waiting for him. For once they were going to get a run for their money. Carson, a real, genuine Earthman, had trained him to beat their quiz game.

It suited Carson mighty well to replace his local representative with a Mally, someone who didn't dare quibble and quarrel and answer back, someone who could be held to strict obedience by constant threat of betrayal and deportation. But it also suited him to play ball with Carson. On Earth he'd enjoy a standard of living far higher than could be gotten elsewhere. And sooner or later he might be able to open a back door for other Mallies.

He was far and away the best prepared illegal immigrant to present himself in two hundred years. He had Carson's papers, Carson's face and fingerprints, Carson's answers to all possible questions. Even his accent had traces of Carson's place of origin.

He knew his mentor's life story from childhood onward, could pick various relatives out of a line-up and be picked out by them, could discuss the old hometown familiarly and for hours on end, could pass muster no matter what inquisitorial tricks they tried.

Wearing the same expression of mixed relief and anticipatory pleasure shown by other passengers, he joined the stream down the ramp, went to the customs shed. Inside was the usual chaos with a dozen officers trying to handle a thousand people.

The officers were speeding things up by relying a good deal upon psychology. They'd weigh up each potential smuggler, pass him on or search him according to what they thought of his or her face.

About forty percent were picked upon, the others hustled onward. He was one of the unlucky ones. He edged along with the file of suspects, came in front of the twelve. One of them looked him over, narrowed his eyes.

"Open up!"

Dumping his luggage on the counter, he unlocked it. The officer rummaged through the lot from top to bottom, found nothing forbidden or dutiable. Registering faint disappointment, he tidied the contents, closed the lids, chalked his initials on the ends.

"All right. Stack it over there under letter C. Collect it when you come out of the interrogation department."

The Mally who was not Carson nodded, went to the farther wall on which the alphabet was painted at six-yard intervals, placed his bags under letter C. The line of now luggageless passengers snaked slowly into the next shed. He went with them, dutifully bearing the same air of suppressed impatience.

He was entering the trap. It wasn't going to catch him.

The set-up didn't look formidable. Twenty uniformed men sat at as many desks each fronted by

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a chair. They had forms on their desks, pens in their hands, and looked unutterably bored. Incoming passengers took chairs as their names were called. Each answered a long series of questions put by his particular interrogator, eventually got given an entry permit, went out to collect his luggage and go home.

Nothing much to worry about there. The questioners were just a bunch of petty officials doing a routine job without visible enthusiasm. True, they'd grabbed every Mally who'd tried to get through since the ban was imposed. But that was no tribute to their cleverness. The stupid or inadequately prepared deserve to be caught.

Waiting for his name to be called, he profited by studying the technique. The sole object of it was to determine whether or not the passenger was a genuine Earthling. A Mally's cartilage was opaque enough to fool X-rays into depicting a plausible skeleton and there was no physical way of identifying him short of cutting him open. But a Mally could be trapped if he didn't keep his wits about him or was insufficiently informed.

The official at the tenth desk got rid of a passenger, shouted, "James George Glover."

A fat man lumbered to the chair, sat down, looked resigned.

"Place of birth?"

"Allentown," said the fat man.

"Date?"

The fat man told him while the officer sought confirmation in a wad of papers.

"When did you leave Earth?"

"Four and a half years ago."

"Who was mayor of Allentown at that time?"

"Sid Westerman."

And so it went on, plain, straightforward questions, trick ones, questions that implied untruths, questions that double-checked previous replies, questions that would tempt a non-Earthling to fall flat on his face.

The officer had the ship's list, the passenger's documents, exit records, several large-scale maps, a number of reference books concerning cities, towns and villages. He consulted these frequently and did not ask a question until he'd already found the answer, thereby knowing at once whether any reply was right or wrong. An incorrect response would be pounced upon and exploited mercilessly, creating ultimate confusion and self-betrayal on the part of the victim.

It was evident that the test did not rely solely upon ability to produce accurate replies. It also depended upon the promptness with which they were given. Too much delay, too much pondering and hesitation aroused immediate suspicion. Data gained from actual experience requires less response-time than data acquired by tuition. They knew that, so they watched not only for error but also for reluctance.

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He'd just had time to absorb these facts when the official at the fourth desk bawled, "Walter Henry Carson!"

Despite earlier confidence he got a queezy feeling in his middle as he walked to the chair and sat. The officer looked him over with guileless blue eyes, saw nothing abnormal or suspicious.

"Place of birth?"

"Agnaville."

"Date?"

"March 18, 2114," said pseudo-Carson, glibly.

There followed a dozen more questions, all innocuous and easily answered, then the questioner examined a book, asked, "What's the name of the river at Agnaville?"

"There isn't any river."

Twenty questions later he inquired, "Whose statue is in Calhoun Square?"

"General Mathieson's."

"Standing or sitting?"

"On horseback."

So the questions continued.

Finally, the officer appeared to slacken from sheer boredom. Placing fingertips together, he gazed at the ceiling as though in silent prayer.

"You seem all right to me, Mr. Carson. But before you go I'd like to try you on a colloquialism. Any objection?"

That was a trap in itself.

"Not at all," said the Mally, feeling triumph rising inside him.

"All right." Still studying the ceiling and looking blank-faced, the officer said, "You are in the engine-room of a big space-liner. In your hands you are holding a steel bolt fourteen inches long by two in diameter. It is heavy, a nuisance and you wish to get rid of it. Just then a space-mechanic comes along. He is rough and tough, with oil on his face and hair on his chest." The blue eyes lowered, looked him through and through. "Would you ask him what to do with it?"

Fast, fast! No hesitation!

"Of course."

The eyes went several times more guileless. "And what answer would you expect?"

"I assume that he'd tell me where to put it."

"Dead right he would!" said the officer, with strange emphasis. He sat up, pressed a red stud.

Two guards led mock-Carson away, took him aboard the ship, locked him in its calaboose. He was still staring at metal walls and trying to solve the puzzle three days later when the vessel took off for the frontier zone again.

Once in free flight, they let him loose, gave him the run of the ship. At the halfway point he was in the bar and palled on with an exploring Earthling. After the fifth glass of firewater he put the issue fairly and squarely.

"I am holding a steel bolt fourteen inches by two and don't know what to do with it. You tell me."

Obligingly the other told him.

The Mally was deeply shocked.

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the unprotected species

by . . . Melvin Sturgis

It was a chill, terrifying planet inhabited by furtive gnomes. And something was forcing the crew into homicidal insanity. But what?

EARLY ON THE first morning after the camp had been secured—scarcely twenty-four hours after the first plastic shack had been erected—four members of the surveying section brought in Bradshaw.

Gallifa, the senior biologist of the party, was loading the half-track in preparation for a field trip when the men placed the stretcher in the shade of the truck. He took one look; and immediately stopped congratulating himself on the ease of operations.

"Damn! Is he dead?" asked the stunned Gallifa.

"He isn't dead," the mapping officer said lamely. "But he's damn well beat up."

Gallifa nodded awkwardly and looked down at the stretcher. Bradshaw was one of his team. A good man. Gallifa hadn't known he wasn't in the compound. Bradshaw wasn't a pleasant sight. Blood covered his face from a deep gash above the temple, and his clothes and body were cut and scratched in a dozen places.

"Better get him over to the hospital," Gallifa ordered brusquely. "I'll be along as soon as I can."

Melvin Sturgis is a mechanical engineer employed by ROCKETDYNE, *Propulsion field laboratory—a division of North American Aviation, Inc. Like many another brilliant young technician with an extra-curricular, electronic string to his bow he has also been a free-lance magazine writer for the past five years. We think you'll agree he has scored heavily here, on the planet of a far-off star!*

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The mapping officer gestured, and the men moved away with their burden. The officer inspected the toes of his boots uncomfortably.

"How did it happen?" Gallifa asked quietly. "I would say that he had been clawed by some kind of animal."

"That's possible," the other agreed unconvincingly. He licked his lips nervously. "Of course, we are not sure just what did happen." He nodded at a tall, sad-faced man standing almost at his elbow. "Hawkins spotted him from the 'copter on his second recon flight this morning. He came back and directed a crew to pick Bradshaw up."

The officer's manner was hesitant and confusing. Gallifa started to speak, then glanced questioningly at Hawkins and motioned impatiently.

Hawkins cleared his throat. "I saw him almost as soon as I was in the air. He was about half a mile on the other side of camp. I probably wouldn't have paid any attention if he hadn't been acting so funny."

Hawkins paused and glanced apologetically at Gallifa. Gallifa frowned.

"You know how thick those brambles are all around here?" Hawkins continued quickly. "Well, Bradshaw was running through them, just as if something was chasing him. The thorns were cutting the clothes right off his back. I couldn't see anything from the air, so I swung the 'copter back and grabbed some men to see if we could find out what was wrong.

"It took almost an hour to find him again. He was in the bottom of a little ravine, leaning against a rock. He seemed to be all right until we were close. Then he picked up a stick and started swinging it around like a wild man. He was clear crazy. I finally had to hit him over the head with a rock to save myself. He was true crazy."

So that was what they had been so hesitant in telling him! Gallifa shook his head in bewilderment. Bradshaw was one of his most competent men. It didn't make sense that he suddenly should go berserk. Something seemed to be missing in the report.

"That doesn't sound right," Gallifa argued stubbornly. "Are you sure Bradshaw wasn't scared half to death by something? A man sometimes does some funny things if he's scared."

"Maybe he *was* scared," Hawkins admitted. "But he was sure acting crazy. I'm sorry—" He spread his hands helplessly and walked away, accompanied by the mapping officer.

Gallifa glanced at his wrist watch and swore softly to himself. He had planned to get an early start, but the Bradshaw tragedy was too important. They still knew relatively nothing about the planet. If a man could wander around for only an hour or so and return with grievous, unexplained injuries—

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Well, it obviously needed looking into.

It would be difficult enough to finish the pre-colonization survey in the alloted time under the best of circumstances, and this was hardly what could be called a smooth beginning. He sighed and walked over to the hospital.

Dr. Thorndyke, a small, swarthy man with the penetrating gaze of his profession, greeted him with a shrug and a puzzled frown.

Gallifa framed the question with his eyes.

"I don't know," the doctor said slowly. "Frankly, I've never seen anything like this before. Your man seems to have lost his mind completely, yet his reactions are at least pseudo-normal. He has an intense homicidal mania, however. He regained consciousness unexpectedly and almost brained two of my medics with a headboard before we could give him a hypo. I don't know whether he'll improve or not. But I've classified him unfit for further survey duty."

Gallifa shook his head in disbelief. The doctor had told him exactly nothing. He had intelligently diagnosed Bradshaw's condition, but he apparently hadn't the slightest idea what had caused it. It was damned strange. Bradshaw's psych check certainly hadn't hinted at any instability. The initial spot check notwithstanding, maybe there *was* something disturbingly wrong with this planet. If such were the case, his team would have to uncover it. The problem would belong to Gallifa.

II

THE PLANET—as yet unnamed—had been surveyed by the spotting cruiser and pronounced suitable for colonization to nine-point-oh on a scale of ten. Of course, the nine-point figure was really only a pro tem rating. The cruiser hadn't been able to conduct a personal survey. That more difficult undertaking would fall to the lot of the pre-col crew.

By the time the balance of the colonists arrived, in forty-five days, the survey party would have to have the initial focal point ready for occupancy, and be in a position to supply all the data the colony would need for survival.

It was the biological team's specific job not only to classify the flora and fauna of the planet, but to determine the adaptability of the colonists to all existing conditions. Bradshaw might have encountered something which would have helped tremendously with the latter category. But it was obvious he wouldn't be able to tell anyone about it.

However, an isolated tragic incident which held no bearing on the success or failure of the colony could not be allowed to interrupt the survey. Gallifa impatiently dismissed the gentle nagging at the back of his mind and returned to the compound. By 1300, Solar

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Time, the camp was considered to be on a standard operating basis.

Gallifa pressed young Samuels into service and finished loading the halftrack. While they were waiting for MacFarland, senior geologist and acting executive of the camp, the natives of the planet appeared.

Gallifa saw them first, and more from surprise than fear hopped to the platform beside the truck seat and swiveled the automatic pellet rifle until the muzzle covered the visitors.

"Samuels," he called softly. "Hey, Samuels, we have a welcoming committee."

Samuels stopped his work and peered over the back of the truck. He was well trained. He didn't move an inch.

"Are they intelligent?" he asked. His view was curtailed slightly by a tool box.

"I can't tell," Gallifa said quietly. "They're clannish, though. There must be fifteen, maybe twenty, in the group. Climb over the back of the truck and take a look," he suggested.

Samuels vaulted lightly into the truck.

Gallifa looked quizzically at his aide. "Well, what do you make of them?" he asked. "Do you think they could have anything to do with Bradshaw's sudden crackup?"

Samuels removed his hat and ran stubby fingers through his blond, short-cropped hair. "It's hard to tell," he answered. "But they sure look harmless to me. In fact, they look somewhat like a bunch of Celtic little people."

Gallifa frowned. He didn't understand.

"You know," Samuels grinned. "Gnomes or elves with big ears. Large dwarf model."

Gallifa turned his attention back to the visitors and laughed. "I see what you mean," he agreed. "Ears and all. They do seem harmless. But it's strange they aren't upset by us. They could be semi-intelligent."

Gallifa stepped gingerly from the truck. He really didn't expect to find a modicum of intelligence. The spotting cruiser had orbited around the planet for more than seventy-two hours before the crew had been deposited, and had almost definitely established the contrary.

On every Earth-type planet that had ever been discovered, if there were intelligent life it had developed according to water-oxygen evolution; and the culture invariably parallelled *homo sapiens*. It was as if a busy and preoccupied nature had hit upon a pattern which worked and never bothered to change the mold. There were minor deviations, of course, biologically and structurally, but never culture-wise.

The swift, but amazingly discerning survey, had revealed absolutely no evidence of any intelligence on the planet. There were no artifacts, dwellings, roads, dams, bridges—primitive or otherwise.

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Any stage of culture would have been observed by the cruiser immediately. The planet seemed ideally suited to colonization.

Gallifa, the trained biologist, carefully studied the creatures. The dwarf-like gnomes, as Samuels had dubbed them, might be considered caricatures of humanity.

They were about four feet high—bipeds, and covered with a soft, pinkish fur. They walked erect; normally so, Gallifa could tell, because their upper limbs were too short for knuckling and were not jointed correctly for moving on all fours. They had five digited limbs, both upper and lower, just as did all higher life forms ever discovered on any planet. Their features were without hair and of a fairy story-humanoid type. With their large, floppy ears, and round-solemn eyes they were very unusual gnomes indeed.

Gallifa spoke to them quietly, trying a few standard low-order communication and classification tricks. The visitors—somehow he couldn't think of them as base animals—made no response. They didn't quite seem to fit any classification niche. The creatures faintly puzzled Gallifa. The best he could do was: Low order intelligence and probably harmless. Cultural development, nil.

As if to prove his rationalizations, the creatures suddenly seemed to ignore the humans. They walked unconcernedly past the truck and attacked the vegetation on the edge of the clearing. Every so often one would overturn a small rock and grub for the exposed insects.

Gallifa observed their broad, dull teeth. They weren't, he decided, omniverous.

Samuels interrupted his train of thought. "Do you think they will give us any trouble?" he asked.

"No," Gallifa affirmed slowly. "Not materially, anyway. But it's going to be interesting, and a little difficult, to study this species. They don't seem to be ecologically feasible. Look at them. They are small and weak. They don't have claws, not even sheathed—and they are definitely too low in the evolutionary scale to know anything of weapons. Their feet obviously aren't constructed for climbing, and their limbs are too short and aren't planned right for running."

He removed his hat and scratched his head. "In short," he finished, "they are an unprotected species, obviously *unable* to protect themselves."

"That's odd enough," Samuels agreed. "But maybe they don't need protection. Maybe they don't have any natural enemies."

"On a raw planet?" Gallifa retorted. "That's not very likely."

"Perhaps I can catch a few for the lab," Samuels suggested. "I'll work up a behavior pattern analysis."

"That shouldn't be too hard," Gallifa said. "They certainly aren't afraid of us. You do that," he

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added suddenly. "I'm going to pick up Mac and be on my way. Otherwise, we'll never get out of here."

"Good hunting," Samuels said. "I'll have a couple of these fat little specimens neatly catalogued for you when you get back."

Gallifa laughed and headed the truck across the compound.

III

GALLIFA found MacFarland by the main-gate shack. He helped him secure a manual excavating kit to the side of the truck, and then headed for a hogback MacFarland had spotted from the early air photos.

Gallifa jolted the truck up a rutted mound and braked close to a grove of trees. They had covered roughly ten miles. Gallifa was still uneasy about Bradshaw, but he had maintained an exceptionally sharp lookout and had seen nothing which might be termed dangerous to a wary colonist. If anything had harmed Bradshaw, the ground must have swallowed it.

MacFarland shouldered his pack and stalked toward an outcropping rock formation. Gallifa planned to work close to the truck in order to keep in touch with the other crews who were on less personalized missions of mass survey with highly sensitive instruments. That was the way, of course, that most of the work would have to be done.

A short time later MacFarland reappeared, red-faced and panting, and with a bulging pack. Gallifa had activated the scanning scope and was casually inspecting the terrain.

"Finding anything of interest?" MacFarland grunted, after he had caught his breath.

"Nothing except a couple of those little creatures like the ones we saw back in camp," Gallifa answered. At MacFarland's frown he remembered, and filled in the details.

"Want to take a look?" he asked.

MacFarland shrugged out of the pack and clambered into the truck. He expertly advanced the power of the scope and swung it in slow arcs.

"I'll help with the pack," Gallifa volunteered.

"Wait a minute!" MacFarland called excitedly. "Take a look at this."

Gallifa frowned and glanced into the view screen. His jaw fell. He leaned forward and swallowed hard. "That's an ugly looking beast," he affirmed, with a grimace.

"I thought the spotting cruiser said there weren't any dangerous animals in the zone where we were supposed to land," MacFarland said caustically. "I think we had better revise the theory—unless you want me to believe the teeth on that thing are used for shredding lettuce."

"No," Gallifa said. "It's a meat eater, all right. Either the cruiser made a mistake, or—and this is more likely—the beast has wander-

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ed in from a more natural habitat. You know, I believe it's after one of the gnomes."

MacFarland left the screen and swung the automatic rifle to bear on the beast. He carefully adjusted the telescopic sights, centering the hair lines on the target. There was a quiet whir and a slight shifting of the rifle as the computer device allowed for correct elevation and windage.

"I have the critter dead center," MacFarland said eagerly.

"Don't shoot," Gallifa suddenly warned. "There is something awfully peculiar about this. I'm positive our friend sees that fellow, but he doesn't seem the least bit worried. Keep the rifle trained, but let's watch a little longer. I'm interested in this."

The gnome did seem aware that he was being stalked. Every so often he stopped to peer over his shoulder where his adversary was in plain view. Then he calmly went on feeding. He made no effort to flee or find concealment.

Gallifa watched in puzzlement. Was the creature really so stupid? It wasn't logical. It just didn't make sense. How had the race survived?

The pursuer tentatively crawled a few feet and stopped, its eyes gleaming. It crawled a few more. It seemed to be appraising the distance to be traversed. All at once it gathered its powerful legs snugly under it. A quick rush and a spring . . .

The gnome suddenly stopped feeding and curled into a tight ball. The charging beast seemed to be trying to change its course in mid-leap. It landed almost on top of its prey, but it didn't strike. Instead, it whirled, biting its shoulder and clawing spasmodically. Then it charged headlong across the slope and disappeared in a cloud of dust.

Back at the truck, Gallifa turned to MacFarland. "Did you shoot it?" he asked with wide eyes.

MacFarland shook his head.

"The gnome just curled up like a porcupine," Gallifa said, frowning. "And that's certainly no protection . . . I wouldn't think. It doesn't have spines or anything."

"You're right," MacFarland answered. "I think the meat eater had a fit, and it's a damn good thing for your friend Mr. Gnome, too!"

"You may be right," Gallifa speculated slowly. "Only—You know, it's a far-fetched thought, but maybe the gnomes throw out some scent that stops their enemies cold."

"It would have to be considerably potent," MacFarland snorted. "To cause a fuss like that!"

"Well," Gallifa affirmed with finality, "Samuels will have several specimens for us back at the base. We will find out after we get back."

"I just thought of something," MacFarland exclaimed suddenly. "Do you think maybe that—that cat—or one like it, attacked Bradshaw? It may have been the reason he ran through the brambles, fig-

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uring the beast couldn't follow."

"Hmm, I see what you mean," Gallifa replied thoughtfully. "The beast *was* sort of catlike, and it *could* have roughed Bradshaw up some. Only it doesn't seem logical that the experience could have driven him to the type of mental breakdown he suffered. Still, it's as good a guess as any, I suppose. Maybe Bradshaw will snap out of it and be able to tell us himself."

MacFarland glanced at the sky. "We'd better be getting back," he suggested. "The other crews will be in, and we have a lot of data to correlate tonight."

Gallifa agreed and secured the rifle and scope. Before he could turn the truck around, they heard the sound of a helijet approaching at maximum speed. Gallifa shaded his eyes and looked at the now hovering craft.

"I think it is Hawkins," he reported. "And I'd say offhand that he wants to talk to us."

The 'copter landed expertly a few feet away, and the blades slowed to idling speed. It was Hawkins. He waved excitedly as he ran toward the truck.

"Mac! Gallifa!" he called. "There's a space ship down a few miles from here!"

Gallifa gasped. A wrecked ship? It seemed inconceivable. A space craft wasn't dainty. Damage from a wreck should have been plainly visible even from the spotting cruiser—ignoring completely their own air maps.

He faced Hawkins. "Are you sure?" he asked incredulously. "How did we ever miss the wreckage?"

"The ship isn't wrecked," Hawkins said levelly. "It's in the same condition that it was in when it landed."

"It's not wrecked?" MacFarland repeated blankly. "Now who in hell—" He turned to Gallifa. "I thought we were the first crew on the planet," he said, almost accusingly. "It's very strange no one told us of any other expedition."

Gallifa frowned in annoyance. "We *are* the first. I'm sure of that. The other ship must be a free lance." He turned to Hawkins. "How about the crew? Are they still with the ship?"

"They're still with the ship," Hawkins said quietly. "But they're all dead. It's quite a mess," he added simply.

"A mess?" Gallifa echoed. "Could you tell how they died? Was it a disease? Were they killed by some animals? Speak up, man!"

"You aren't going to believe this," Hawkins said grimly. "But it sure looks like they killed each other."

"Why would they want to do that?" MacFarland protested. "Are you sure, Hawkins? How could you tell, anyway?"

"I could tell," Hawkins insisted. "You better come and have a look for yourselves. I'll take you in the 'copter, then bring you back for the truck."

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Gallifa shrugged, and the men joined Hawkins in the helijet. The mapping man handled the controls, and the ship soared into the air.

"There is something else kind of funny, too," Hawkins volunteered. "The ship landed almost on top of a colony of the screwiest bunch of things you ever saw. They look something like little gnomes, only with a pinkish fur. They are all around the ship, but they haven't bothered anything."

"More gnomes," Gallifa told MacFarland. "I wonder if they're ecologically basic?" He addressed Hawkins. "Gnomes are exactly what I called them, but I'm quite sure there were never such gnomes on Earth. What do you mean by colony? Like a village?"

"No," Hawkins said slowly. "Not that. Maybe I don't mean colony. They just sort of hang around and eat together. They don't have any dwellings, or anything like that. At least, none that I could see," he amended.

Gallifa wasn't sure why he sighed with relief. At least his hypothesis wasn't spoiled. They were clannish. But hell, rabbits were clannish. Herd development wasn't anything more than instinct.

IV

THE HELIJET suddenly swooped around and settled for a landing. It was easy to see how the grounded ship had avoided detection. It was camouflaged almost perfectly —although whether purposely or not wasn't readily discernible.

The space craft wasn't large. Gallifa estimated an eight-man crew, and Hawkins proved him correct. He had found all of them at once. They had been dead a long while; decomposition had been thorough. But Hawkins was right. It did look as if they had killed themselves.

They were scattered haphazardly around an irregular perimeter of the ship, and no two of the bodies were close together. The positions of the skeletons showed that they hadn't been molested by any wild animals—nor had they been killed by any.

But the strange thing—and this to Gallifa was also a senseless thing —was the startling fact that each skeleton had a pellet pistol still firmly clasped in its fleshless hand.

The magazines of all the weapons were either completely discharged or nearly so. Hence it was obvious that they had been firing at each other. But why? If it had been a battle between two rival factions — in itself incredible — Gallifa could have understood to some degree. But these men were all alone. Each of them had obviously been against all the rest. No matter how you looked at it, there wasn't any answer.

MacFarland was hard to convince. "Maybe they didn't kill each other," he insisted. "How do you know those creatures—gnomes, as

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you call them—didn't attack the ship?"

"If you had ever been close to a gnome," Gallifa answered wearily, "you'd have your answer. I can't guess why, but these men killed themselves, beyond any possible doubt."

"Then they must have gone completely crazy," MacFarland said stubbornly. "Every last one of them."

Gallifa frowned as he remembered Bradshaw. Crazy? Could it be possible that the crew of this ship had stumbled on something which had driven them into insanity? Psychologically, Gallifa couldn't discount an idea simply because it seemed impossible. A newly established colony was a fragile thing.

"While we are here," Gallifa said, "let's take a closer look at that colony of gnomes. I think I noticed something from the air which doesn't jibe with our first impression of them."

The three men climbed a little hillock, and Gallifa carefully studied the area in front of him. He finally shook his head in bafflement.

"This is an unbelievably screwy planet. These creatures apparently haven't reached any stage of development higher than the herd instinct, and yet they are farming. It doesn't make any kind of sense. The species is completely out of character."

MacFarland looked at the virgin growth below him, and shook his head. "That's a farm?" he asked sarcastically.

Gallifa grinned. "You would have to be a biologist to catch on," he explained. "See that yellowish bush? The one with the purple blossoms? Now look at the area directly in front of us. Not a single bush. If you will look carefully you will find several types of plant life which are growing freely everywhere except in the area I showed you. The gnomes are allowing only the plants they want to grow in the area.

"Perhaps they aren't exactly *farming*," he elaborated. "That is, they may not be planting anything in an orderly fashion. But they *are* cultivating. And it all adds up to the same thing. They are increasing an edible crop by eliminating—well, weeds. And if they can do that, they should have a corresponding cultural development.

"Another thing bothers me," Gallifa complained. "If these stupids are a natural prey for animals, as unprotected as they are, I should think they would live in some kind of thick brambles. That at least would give them some measure of safety. I think the bio team is going to have more than their share of headaches."

"Let's work on it tomorrow," MacFarland suggested tiredly. "I want to get back to camp."

Hawkins returned them to the truck, and Gallifa and MacFarland jolted off into the gathering dusk.

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It was fully dark by the time they reached the camp.

Gallifa checked his team, then gathered their various findings together and sent them over to the Administration Building for further evaluation. Samuels didn't check in with the rest. Gallifa assumed that he was busy with the gnomes. He wanted to discuss the queer creatures with him, and wandered over to the specimen shack. Samuels wasn't there. Neither were any of the natives.

Gallifa returned to the team shack and left a note on Samuel's bunk telling him where he could be found. Then he went over to the Administration Building to work with MacFarland. The next few hours he and MacFarland were so busy sorting material and feeding it to the analyzers that he forgot his aide.

Finally Gallifa finished verifying the last of a huge stack of photographs, and stuffed the important ones into a plastic envelope. He added the date seal, initialed it, and handed it to one of the men to take to the laboratory for micro-filming. Then he produced a battered pipe and filled it with tobacco, slowly tamping the bowl with his fingers.

He had just about finished his smoke when the messenger returned to the Administration Building. "—Galilfa," he began.

Gallifa knew that something was wrong by the way the man hesitated. He sprang up. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"Some of the boys ran into Samuels over on the edge of camp," the messenger said miserably. "He was clear out of his head. He fought like a tiger, and they had to tie him hand and foot to get him over to the sick bay. The doctor wants you to come right over."

Gallifa turned a white face to MacFarland. "What the devil," he said woodenly. "Is my whole team going crazy?"

MacFarland slipped into his field boots. "I'll go with you," he said.

Outside a cold drizzle was falling, and from the way the leaden skies were piling up, Gallifa was convinced that it would stay around for several days. Evidently the weather boys had been right in predicting that the planet was about to be plagued by a rainy season.

As they drew near to the edge of camp, Cummings, the little, bald-headed meteorologist of the weather group, burst out of the weather shack, cursing soundly and waving a boot in one hand.

"Damn those piebald dwarfs," he shouted. "They've got more brass than a fire pole. They stole one of my boots."

He threw the boot and disappeared around the corner. "Get out of here, you little devils!"

"The gnomes seem to have invaded the camp," MacFarland remarked. "We'll have to take steps to chase them out. They might get into our stores."

"Yeah," Gallifa nodded glumly.

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He was too upset with the problem of Bradshaw and Samuels to worry about gnomes.

From all indications Samuels had developed the same malady as Bradshaw. The doctor pursed his lips and shrugged his shoulders. Thirty-three hours on the planet and two men suddenly, violently insane! Did that herald an epidemic, Gallifa wanted to know. Or could it simply be put down to an unlucky coincidence? Could it be a disease or a virus?

There were tests that might shed some light on the mystery, the doctor admitted. But it would take time to apply them and reach any kind of conclusion. Meanwhile, the work had to continue. The survey could not wait.

Samuels had been given a hypo and been moved to the ward with Bradshaw. Gallifa walked past the ward corpsman and looked in the door. Bradshaw was tossing fretfully in his sleep. Both he and Samuels were in restraint jackets.

Gallifa shuddered and swabbed a perspiring brow. The rain was making everything muggy.

He left MacFarland still talking to Dr. Thorndyke, and started back—heading directly for the team shack. Gallifa was obviously worried. He found himself wishing that he could somehow avoid telling the rest of the crew about Samuels.

Damn! Was the Bio team jinxed?

V

GALLIFA KEPT close to the shacks in a futile effort to protect himself from the rain, which was really driving now. A single light burned in the Administration Building, but the rest of the compound was dark and quiet.

He skirted the deserted equipment building and paused for an instant in the lee of a truck to light his pipe. There was a loud tinkle of glass, and the windshield on the vehicle magically spouted a hole.

Gallifa ducked instinctively and only just in time. The windshield spouted a second hole—and then a third. A faint, bluish flash located his attacker. It was uncomfortably close.

Gallifa lashed out, and fell over a crouching figure. In a moment the two men were thrashing in the mud. The unseen attacker was strong and he fought like a maniac. But Gallifa was even stronger and his determined anger quickly gave him the advantage. He wrested the pellet gun from the other's grasp, and brought the butt down hard—brought it down twice. The man slumped, and was still.

Gallifa snapped on his wrist torch and played the tiny, luminous glow over the sprawled figure. The man who had tried to kill him was Cummings. Gallifa numbly wiped the mud from his pipe and lit it with a flickering lighter. The flame made a weird, cameo-like oval of his gaunt face, with the olive-toned

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skin of his ancestry stretched tightly across the high cheekbones.

Why? Bradshaw . . . Samuels . . . Cummings . . .

A pattern was forming. And it was forming with a viciousness and a regularity which left little doubt as to the probable outcome.

Did that pattern embrace the space ship with its ring of rain-washed skeletons? Had they disintegrated under a pressure as relentless as the swiftly-tightening jaws of a vise. *Something* was forcing normal men into homicidal insanity. But what?

Gallifa didn't know. But he did know that someone had better come up with some answers—intelligent ones, and very much to the point. Or was it already too late? Was the compound already infected—with each man only waiting to be struck down?

Gallifa draped the limp body of Cummings over his shoulder, and sloshed his way back to the hospital. The doctor grimly made room in the ward room for the new patient. While he was treating the gash in Gallifa's cheek, MacFarland, Hawkins, and some of the early-rising camp cooks brought in two more men from the weather group.

Gallifa watched in tight-lipped silence as the corpsmen administered hypos and set the new cots end to end in the already overcrowded sickbay.

"There were only two restraint jackets," Dr. Thorndyke said jerkily. "We'll have to secure the rest of them to the bunks."

MacFarland nodded. When he spoke, his voice was low and strained. "This is getting out of hand. I think we'd better get everybody over to the Administration Building as soon as possible."

"All right," Gallifa said quietly. "Only—"

"Only what?" MacFarland asked sharply.

"What if everybody in camp isn't available," Gallifa said flatly. He opened the door and stepped into the rain.

The Administration Building was hot. The windows were steamed over, and the men nearest to them had wiped clear spots with their hands, as if they could not bear the thought of not being able to peer out into the night.

The room buzzed with a kind of orderly confusion. The men were scared and they made no effort to conceal it. Gallifa studied a slip of paper covered with tally marks, and then quickly stuffed it into his pocket.

Ten men were now missing, not counting the ones already in the hospital. They couldn't be accounted for, so it had to be assumed they were either sick—or dead.

It had been decided that Gallifa and Dr. Thorndyke were the best qualified to take charge of the camp until normality returned. Gallifa studied the men carefully.

"We haven't much to go on," he said with grim candor. "We're

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still in the dark as to what is happening. We only know that when it takes place, it happens damn fast—and without discrimination. Men have been affected both in and out of camp.

"So far, here are the facts. To the best of our knowledge none of the men have been bitten by animals and we haven't found any poisonous plants. Dr. Thorndyke is considering the possibility that some unknown virus which affects the brain may be responsible. He's over in the laboratory running tests now. If it is a virus, grouping together like this might be a mistake. We'll load everybody up with anti-biotics and hope for the best. We've got to lick this!

"Until now," Gallifa continued grimly, "no one has been hurt except the stricken men. We want to keep it that way. One fact stands out bluntly. All of the men have been damned anti-social. They want to be left alone, and will attempt to kill anyone who gets close to them. That should make them easy to spot. If we are to have a chance to cure them, we have to catch them first.

"We are going to have to consider the likelihood that more of us will be affected. We must do everything within our power to isolate those suspiciously-acting persons. Probably the ship Mac and I discovered didn't have the warning I am giving to you now. We can lick this thing if we're determined enough. The main thing is not to lose your head. Watch your neighbor, but don't jump to conclusions. Be sure before you act."

There was a stir and Gallifa paused. The doctor pushed his way through the men to the front of the room. His face was white and haggard.

"What about the tests?" Gallifa asked.

"There aren't going to be any tests," Dr. Thorndyke replied grimly. "At least not on the men in the hospital. They are all dead."

"What happened?" Gallifa urged, his eyes wide with shock.

Everyone was very quiet.

The doctor wiped his hand across his forehead. "Nolan was on duty in the wardroom. He went out for a smoke. I heard him go out. I didn't hear him come back. I was setting up some new equipment. When I finally went back to the ward Nolan must have caught—whatever it is. He was gone, and he'd slit every man's throat with a scalpel."

Gallifa faced the assemblage. "We're going to inoculate everyone here. As soon as we're through, I want each team to go to their own shacks and stay there. If you *have* to go somewhere, go in pairs. If you see anyone wandering around by himself, no matter *who* he is, bang him over the head with something and bring him over to the hospital. Otherwise, stay put."

The men received their shots in an uncomfortable silence and disappeared into the night. Gallifa,

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MacFarland, and Dr. Thorndyke remained in the Administration room.

"Any idea what it is, doc?" MacFarland asked huskily.

"I hardly had time to take care of the patients," Dr. Thorndyke replied bitterly. "Did you honestly expect me to find out what was wrong with them in a few short hours?"

"But—" Gallifa began.

MacFarland suddenly started, and leapt to his feet. The doctor moved away, his face paling.

"What's the matter?" Gallifa asked, alarmed.

"Don't be so old womanish," MacFarland snapped. "I'm not catching it. I just thought of something. Cummings had a gun. Where did he get it?"

"The storeroom!" Gallifa exclaimed. "I'd forgotten we had weapons and ammo in the storeroom! If things got bad enough, we *could* wipe ourselves out. We'd better check."

"I'm going back to the hospital," Dr. Thorndyke said bluntly. "I'm going to lock the door. If anyone comes banging around he damn well had better know who he is and talk intelligently—or I'll slice him from his wishbone to his crotch." He stalked out.

Gallifa stared blankly after Dr. Thorndyke. It was funny hearing him talk this way. He had always thought of the doc as being rather mild-mannered. Damned flexible, humans!

VI

THEY FOUND the door was torn off the storeroom. It hadn't even been secured. Someone had just been in a terrific hurry. There wasn't a single weapon left. MacFarland studied the disarray, then thoughtfully hefted a broad-bladed pick axe.

"I'm of the opinion," he said quietly, "that in a short time things are going to get a little rough around here."

"Now wait a minute, Mac," Gallifa protested.

"Sorry, boy," MacFarland said grimly. "If I knew everyone else was barehanded, I would go along with you. I may not be the next victim—or the tenth. I'll more than likely have to protect myself against someone who has come down with it, however, and I've got an overwhelming desire to stay alive."

Gallifa let his hands drop helplessly to his sides. MacFarland was right, of course. They hadn't acted soon enough. Was this how panic was born?

"Mac," Gallifa tried huskily. "We've got to keep our heads. If we don't, we'll destroy ourselves."

"I'm open to any suggestions," MacFarland said steadily. "But until I'm satisfied that the danger is past, I'll just hang on to this axe."

"Let's go back over to the hospital," Gallifa said wearily. "We'll use Thorndyke's projector and go over every inch of micro-film we

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have. We may be too close to the problem. There must be something we've overlooked."

Outside the rain had slackened into a fine mist. Overhead the clouds still held, but they were somewhat lighter. In a short while, it would be dawn. Every light in the compound was burning fiercely. Gallifa suddenly remembered the generator in the shack behind the Administration Building. If anyone smashed or damaged the generator beyond repair, the camp would be without power of any kind. And they might be forced to warn the colonists to stay away from the planet.

He stopped MacFarland. "I think we better secure the door to the generator shack," he said thoughtfully. "We can put a robot control on the radio, but we have to insure power."

MacFarland understood the reason immediately. But before he could answer angry voices rang out somewhere across the compound.

Gallifa hesitated. "You better see what that is," he told MacFarland. "And I'll check the generator."

MacFarland nodded and slipped away. Gallifa detoured around the hospital and carefully approached the Administration Building. Once he saw something moving in the half-light and halted abruptly. It was only a few of the little gnomes moving through the camp.

Gallifa quickly rummaged through the spare parts cache in the shack and drove stout pegs into the door jamb and the door. Then he expertly wove a short length of wire around the pegs and drew them tight with a pair of wire nippers. He leaned a shoulder against the door until he was satisfied it would hold. Then he returned to the hospital.

MacFarland met him at the back entrance. The five corpses still lay shackled to the bunks in a mute and grisly reminder of how quickly deterioration had spread through the embryonic colony. Gallifa felt his jaw muscles tighten.

"The bio team stole all the weapons," MacFarland said without preamble. "They've barricaded themselves in the mess hall and threaten to shoot anyone who comes within ten feet of the door."

Gallifa waited, his expression somber.

"The other teams are mad clear through," MacFarland continued. "I convinced them to go back to their own shacks, but I don't know how long they will stay there."

Gallifa nodded. "If the other teams decide to rush the mess hall—" He let the sentence trail off and grimly began to sort the micro-film.

A few hours later he had uncovered a series of very surprising—and confusing—facts. He was amazed by the extent and completeness of the data the teams and machines had assembled during their brief stay on the planet. Gallifa closed his eyes and began to sift

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through the data with the queer, persistent sixth sense of all true research men.

The field of biology isn't limited. It begins just under the crust of a planet, encompasses the surface, and extends . . . as far as needs be. Gallifa was a good biologist. And now he had a series of incredible facts at his command. He thought he had the answer to the epidemic. Only if he was on the right track —and he was almost sure of it— the cure might be so simple that it would be no cure at all.

How did you cure fear?

MacFarland was dozing across the room. Gallifa suddenly realized how tired he really was. Perhaps the doctor could give him a stimulant. In any case, he wanted to discuss an idea with Dr. Thorndyke. He stood up and gathered together the papers lying scattered on the desk.

Mac Farland was immediately awake. He held the axe loosely in one big hand, but a slight tensing of the muscles in his forearm denoted his readiness to use the weapon.

Gallifa noticed only that MacFarland was awake. He gestured vaguely and walked through the room to the doctor's office.

"Dr. Thorndyke!" Gallifa called.

"Eh!" The doctor was startled. He walked quickly over to a wall cabinet and busied himself with an electronic sterilizer. When he turned he was holding a short-barreled, hair-thin hypodermic jet.

"I've been hoping you'd come by," he said. "That cut in your cheek. You should have had a tetanus shot."

Gallifa automatically bared an arm and leaned on the table. The doctor held the needle up to the light and exerted a minute pressure on the plunger. He reached for Gallifa's arm.

MacFarland was across the room in five quick strides. He hit the doctor across the side of the head with the broad blade of the axe. Dr. Thorndyke sighed and collapsed loosely on the floor. The point of the dropped hypodermic shattered and a milky fluid oozed from the splintered end.

Gallifa's reflexes were slow. For a long moment he stood as though stunned. Then shock caught at him. But the slow-motion time which gripped him wouldn't allow him to take more than two steps before the axe in MacFarland's big hand would come crashing down. He wished he could have activated the transmitter before it happened. Dazed, he wondered who would warn the colonists?

Gallifa suddenly realized he had placed the portable operating table between himself and the other man. He drew his first breath, and it caught in his throat. Then he was through the door and running across the compound. He stumbled towards the equipment shack and threw himself in the back of a truck.

MacFarland didn't follow.

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VII

GALLIFA rubbed his aching eyes and rested. How many hours had passed since he had slept or eaten? It was fully light now, although the dawn sky was gray because of the clouds. A strong wind pulled at his hair, and the first heavy drops of another rainstorm pelted against his face. Gallifa moved under the half-top canvas and wished for a slicker. The rain was cold.

The crackle of small arms brought Gallifa to the edge of the truck. He hadn't realized how still the camp really was. The tension was a live thing, coiled in the wet air. There was no doubt the firing came from the messhall. The bio team had all of the weapons.

Gallifa was sure he could stop the panic if he could contact the men. If only they weren't so scattered. He had to try. He gave another quick look at the hospital door, then sped around the Administration Building.

Something hit him from the side and hurled him joltingly to the sharp gravel. Gallifa rolled to a fighting crouch, dimly realizing that his right arm was almost paralyzed. He shook his head hard against the pain. The man was Nolan—and he was the most frightened man Gallifa had ever seen.

His face was convulsed with such abject terror that Gallifa was stunned. He was like an animal at bay, with all moving life his enemy. Gallifa remained perfectly still, his eyes on the surgeon's scalpel in Nolan's hand. Then from the mess hall came another rattle of fire.

Gallifa couldn't help jumping. Nolan drew his tight lips away from his teeth and gestured menacingly with the scalpel. Then a beefy arm appeared from nowhere and struck the corpsman a chopping blow at the base of the skull. He dropped the scalpel and fell silently to the ground.

MacFarland stepped around the corner of the building.

Gallifa tried to rise, then gave way to the weakness of his limbs. The ground spun crazily past his face and he passed out.

"Gallifa! Snap out of it! Wake up, boy!"

Rough hands were shaking him. He opened his eyes.

"I didn't kill Doc," MacFarland said quietly. "There wasn't time to explain. I had to act fast. He had enough knockout juice in that needle to put you away permanently."

Gallifa searched the other man's face. Then, slowly the tension went out of his features. "I heard shots?"

"Your boys took a few shots at me," MacFarland admitted. "I guess they thought I was rushing them."

Gallifa stared at Nolan. "We've got to contact the men before it's too late," he said. "I know what caused the epidemic—and how to stop it. Anyway, temporarily. If I can only find some way to get them to listen."

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MacFarland said: "We'll find a way. Tell me about it."

"There's nothing wrong with this camp now but fear," Gallifa continued wearily. "Or the *fear* of fear. There wasn't any epidemic. It was the gnomes. It's all here in the micro-film."

MacFarland stared blankly.

"You know how we survey?" Gallifa said quickly. "We send out low-flying 'copters and track the neural waves from all animal life. Later on, after we pick up some specimens, all the neural patterns on the tapes are matched. Otherwise, we wouldn't know one from the other. This information, along with other data, is fed to the analyzers and we get an excellent idea of the type and distribution of all life in a given area. The boys did a good job with the 'copters. They covered enough territory to provide all the data we need at present."

"So?" MacFarland asked.

"Somehow," Gallifa went on, "Samuels managed to get a neural trace from the natives before he went insane. It's right here in his report. And the trace matches perfectly with some of the patterns taken from the 'copters. When I fed the patterns to the analyzers, I got some damned strange results. The analyzers classified the gnomes as an oversized form of rodent, somewhat similar to rabbits and rats. This I suspected. What I hadn't suspected was that their neural wave was so strong it could be projected as a physical impulse."

"I still don't see—" intejected MacFarland.

"It's simple," Gallifa said. "The natives are *mental skunks*. I don't know how they do it. Maybe we can't even find out. But I can guess how it works. The creatures transmit a neural charge as real as an electric current. We don't yet know the range, but we've already seen it in action."

"The cat!" MacFarland said.

Gallifa nodded. "The 'copter survey showed that where the instruments located gnomes, there was very little other animal life in a wide area. Their charge may be deadly to a non-reasoning animal if it is exposed more than a few moments. To a human it isn't deadly, but it's devastating. The charge must hurt the mind so badly that it defends itself with the only bit of reasoning left. Kill or be killed. That's why our men turned homicidal."

"If this is true," MacFarland said soberly, "can we do anything about it? Can we destroy these creatures?"

"We can probably destroy them," Gallifa said slowly. "But remember the rabbits in Australia? The gnomes are ecologically basic. They are by far the most numerous animal in this area."

"Meaning," said MacFarland, "that if we killed them off here, they would swarm in from somewhere else? That will mean a running battle."

Gallifa smiled grimly at Mac-

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Farland's use of the future tense. "We may have to live with them for awhile. But our immediate problem is how to convince the men that we can solve the present crisis—while we still have time."

"You'd never dare approach the mess hall," MacFarland warned.

The camp waited, wound up to the breaking point. Along about the middle of the afternoon, maybe before, all hell was going to bust loose. Unless he could stop it.

He suddenly grabbed MacFarland's arm. "Mac!" he asked eagerly. "The generator. Do you know if it's still working?"

A look of understanding crossed MacFarland's face. "The bull horn. Of course! Everyone in camp can hear the bull horn."

They made it past the mess hall without drawing any fire. A few moments later the resonant voice of the loudspeaker was booming across the camp. Gallifa spoke slowly, methodically, trying to convince and reassure. He paused, then once more repeated the plea.

He almost gave up. Then slowly the mapping gang edged into the open and filed toward the Administration room. Finally the bio team left the mess hall, and Gallifa let the heavy horn drop. What now? The present nightmare was almost over, but what of the future?

"We will be able to control the gnomes locally," MacFarland said, seeming almost to guess his thoughts. "As we expand, they will have to give."

"Maybe," Gallifa said. "But just because they are rodents. Don't underestimate their possibilities.

"The creatures of this planet have never been pressed. Nothing has been able to push them up the evolutionary ladder. We'll be the toughest environment they've ever faced, for we know the power of their defensive mechanism. How well will we be able to compete if they learn to use it as an offensive weapon?"

"We can't," MacFarland said.

"We know it's selective," Gallifa corrected. "They didn't bother either Samuels or myself when we first contacted them. We also know all of the stricken men weren't actively molesting gnomes. Therefore, some were hit due to the actions of others. The only question is—how selective is their power?"

"Then how *can* we handle them?" MacFarland questioned soberly.

Gallifa shrugged. "I don't know," he said simply. "We're committed here, and we'll stay. This isn't the first time the human race has been challenged—it won't be the last."

Gallifa turned and walked toward the Administration Building. Humans had solved a hundred problems on a hundred planets. Problems existed to be solved. This one, too, would be solved. But no matter how hard or how easy, it would be an experiment.

As all humanity was an experiment.

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lords of gestation

by . . . Sherwood Springer

It was a daring blueprint for the future. But a future that ignores a woman with a child in her arms must go down to shameful defeat.

CYRUS BLACKSTONE, sixty-seventh President of the United States, strode for the third time to the window and stared down into the night. The scene below had changed in no noticeable particular.

Behind him, filling to capacity one of the four leatherene chairs, Jules Sternmaker considered gravely the gray ash of his cigar. When he spoke he could have been addressing the perfecto itself. "Once more, Cyrus," he said, "where is your wife?"

The President's hands, clasped behind him, whitened at the knuckles. "That's something," he said without turning, "I can't tell you."

"There's one alternative."

"There's always an alternative."

"This is one you may not like." Sternmaker rolled the cigar slowly, ash upward, between his thumb and fingers. "Pell must be silenced."

Blackstone stiffened perceptibly. When he swung around his eyes revealed his scorn. "You're out of your mind."

"We have recognized what you so far have failed to see. Cyrus,

We have seldom published a story quite as frank as this—or a story quite as magnificently forthright in its premises and insights. It is not only a bold, fine, courageous challenge to the hush-hush school of fiction—it is entertainment of a superior sort. There is no branch of literature which would not be immeasurably enriched by the candor displayed here, but we are especially pleased to see it displayed with such artistry by a writer of science fiction.

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this is a crisis. Crises demand stern measures, and we're prepared to take them."

The President, a big man himself, approached the other's chair. His voice, which had rallied millions to his support through two campaigns, was low now and intense with feeling. "You're forgetting something, Jules. I've done many things that wouldn't look pretty on the books. But I've never, and you know it, violated one of my basic principles. Free speech in America is an inalienable right."

"Bravo, Cyrus. Spoken like a patriot," Sternmaker applauded blandly. "We won't need to silence Pell. We'll just spike his prattle." His voice became suddenly ominous. "Produce your wife."

Only the tightening and loosening of Blackstone's jaw muscles betrayed the turmoil within him. There was little subtlety in the other's gambit. He knew Sternmaker and the Foundation behind him too well to misinterpret the big man's tone. Without a word he wheeled and returned to the window.

Damn the Pioneer Women, he thought as he gazed below. Less than two hours to midnight, and they were still parading. Once more the President's eyes flitted over the luminous lettering on their bobbing signs. "Repeal the Gestation Act," some of them read. "Return Our Heritage," "We Want Our Own Babies," "Down With Sowpregs!"

The President's lips thinned. Turning to his desk, he flipped the switch on his V-fone and dialed a number, while Sternmaker, his brows elevated the merest trifle, regarded him in silence.

An intermittent buzzing indicated his number had been reached. The sound continued a full minute, then the servo cut in: "Your party does not answer. Do you wish to leave a message?"

In the fleeting seconds before the President replied, a chill touched his spine. In the three months Beth had been gone, how many times had he called her? Usually it was Beth who called *him*. Now the servo's mechanical voice brought with it a fact that had never registered before: Not once, in all those months, had a single call he had placed been answered by Beth herself.

With an effort, Blackstone stifled an impulse to glance at Sternmaker, half fearing his eyes might betray his thought. "A message," he said tightly into the instrument. Then, with the click of the stylus, he added: "Beth, this is Cy. Please call me as soon as possible."

For a long minute after he had hung up, the President sat graven-faced, his index finger tapping his desk top.

"I'm curious to know," Sternmaker said finally, "whether you suspect what Pell is leading up to."

"You mean about Beth?" he parried. Suspicion reared up in his mind. Had Beth told him the truth about her book? Was it to be as she described—or would it be a

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rallying call to the idiots who were trying to undo his crowning work? Xavier Pell, the news commentor long a thorn in the side of the Progress Party, would love to broadcast such a priceless item. Beth Blackstone reveals the truth behind the Gestation Act! He knew her stand on the subject. It had been the focal point of many a bitter discussion. But he hadn't dreamed she would be disloyal to the extent of—

"You know precisely what I mean," Sternmaker broke in. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but has Pell ever made a statement he couldn't back up with evidence?" He paused, but Blackstone did not seem inclined to debate the point.

"Within three days he's going to tell the world your wife is *pregnant*."

For seconds it appeared the President had not heard. Then the picture he had erected tumbled in the wake of Sternmaker's preposterous words. Laughter welled up in him and seeped from his eyes. "Pregnant," he gasped, and, as he recovered finally, "my God, Jules, you almost sound as if you believed it yourself."

"I'm stating facts," the other returned flatly. "We have our channels."

"You're mad. Pell's no idiot. A statement like that would finish him."

Sternmaker rose ponderously. At the door he paused and regarded the President. "Would it?" he said. Then he was gone.

Blackstone shook his head in wonder. "The man's mad," he muttered. "Completely mad. It's unbelievable."

As if on cue, there was a buzz from the V-fone. He flipped on the receiver-and, at the sound of Beth's voice, turned on the screen. With her smile less than two feet away, he felt his doubt disappearing like fog before the sun.

"What is it, darling?" she asked.

"Beth, you've got to return to Washington."

"But my book, Cyrus. I'm deep in revision and it will take—"

"Finish it later—or bring it with you. It can wait. This can't. Rumors are spreading, and the Foundation thinks—"

It was tactless, he realized at once.

"The Foundation!" Beth flared. "When are you going to start being the President of the United States, and stop being a busboy for those fat plutocrats? You're forever talking about freedom. How about the freedom they've taken away from millions of women?"

"Look, Beth," he interrupted. "I've told you before. How did they wipe out smallpox? Compulsory vaccination. Everybody. Was it wrong to take away a person's freedom to have smallpox? And the venereal diseases—"

Cyrus, deadly earnest now, was prepared to go on, when something about his serious face struck Beth

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as funny. Her laughter left him scrabbling for words.

"You win, Abe Lincoln. I'll vote for you. But I can't get back to Washington for at least a week."

"A week will be too late."

Beth nodded in mock sadness. "Of course, darling. The Foundation fiddles, and you must jump. I'll come."

As the conversation ended, Blackstone stared at the darkened screen. Beth pregnant? It was preposterous. Still, what *proof* did he have that she was not? There was no way of telling from her face. Her CC shot then? He brushed the thought aside. It was nonsense to suppose that during the months she had been gone she could have moved about without a validated card.

Either Fell or Sternmaker's informant was out on a limb. Cyrus's memory flew back over the years with Beth. All in all, they had been happy years. Beth was well educated and sharply attractive. Headstrong, perhaps, as far as her social responsibilities went, especially three months before when she became determined to disappear for a while to write this book. But beyond that their only differences had been over his championing the Gestation Act, and his political tie-in with the Foundation. In spite of this defection, he was sure of one thing: He still loved his wife.

In fact, he repeated it to himself two or three times, while another part of his brain began busying itself with precautions. He lifted the V-fone and called Bancroft, his Secret Service chief.

"I've a mission for you," he said. "Can you get here in half an hour?"

At 14:00 the next afternoon Bancroft handed the President a decoded wire:

"PARTY NOT KNOWN BY NAME OR DESCRIPTION HERE. WAITING ORDERS. PERLEY."

"A mistake's been made," Blackstone protested. "Is this from the man you sent to Denver?"

"Perley and Grove are top men. If they say she's not there I'll stake my job on it."

"But, my God, man, she's been there for months. I've talked with her every week. I called her just last night. It's a Denver number."

Bancroft remained unshaken. "All right. We'll trace the number." He jotted it down and was prepared to leave when Blackstone stopped him at the door.

"One more thing. I want to learn where and when Mrs. Blackstone had her last contraceptive shot. It should have been, let's see, about eight months ago. And use discretion. I don't want anyone at the CC Bureau to find out I'm probing."

Bancroft nodded. "Naturally."

After the man had gone, the President requested his secretary to cancel a dinner engagement for that evening. He suddenly felt a com-

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pelling desire personally to hear Pell's broadcast.

Thus, at the appointed time, the President of the United States, alone in his study, became one with millions of his constituents from Key West to the Bering Strait. His finger pressed the stud on the arm of his chair, and his three-foot screen became activated with the commentor's opening words.

Xavier Pell was no ranter. Many of his broadcasts were innocuous enough. Many, on the other hand, were gimlets that probed into sore spots of the world. And yet, strangely enough, his libel had seldom been challenged; his facts often were deniable, perhaps, but apparently never refutable.

"Tonight," Pell said, "let's examine the Gestation Act. Its story goes back many, many years."

While Blackstone waited, Pell traced the Act's history back to the biological research of Rock, Menkin, Chang and others in the early twentieth century. Due to the work of these pioneers it was already possible to flush an ovum from a human female, fertilize it with sperm outside the body, and finally implant the thus fertilized egg in the uterus of another female. Since a developing embryo, owing to the mechanics of an enveloping placenta, receives nothing but nourishment from its host mother, it is born completely an offspring of its original parents.

Once the process had been perfected, Pell went on, its results were far-reaching. Women who were physically incapable of bearing children could now become mothers by proxy. A new profession sprang up. Many large-boned women became professional embryo hosts, collecting sizeable fees for commissioned pregnancies. Lawmakers were busy, too. New statutes had to be set up to govern the legal parentage of these "incubated" babies. More than one hotly contested court trial resulted before their status was finally established.

Meanwhile research was being pushed in another direction. Biochemists were attempting to overcome the protein structure antagonism of animal hosts for implanted human ova. Because of this basic curiosity of chemistry, cross-breeding is possible only within the boundaries of biological species groups and processes of nutrition fail when the embryo of one species is transplanted to the uterus of another.

Cattle and horses were principally chosen for these experiments, both because of their physical size and their domestication. But work in this field continued to prove fruitless.

"It was just thirty-six years ago," Pell went on, "that Ehrlich Strohm, doing research in a privately endowed laboratory in Texas, licked the problem. He had realized that swine, strange as it may seem, bore more resemblance physiologically to homo sapiens than did any other domesticated mammal. And a sow

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it was who bore the first cross-nurtured child, a five-month girl. There were scientists who scoffed at the announcement, especially since Strohm was prevented by his associates from revealing the method by which the feat had been accomplished. But the world was soon to recognize the validity of his claim. A foundation was formed among his backers, the work was pushed forward rapidly and within three years the project had been placed on a commercial basis, in competition with the professional mothers.

"During this period, however, a furor of opposition arose, especially among various religious groups, and for a time the foundation's venture appeared to be tottering. But there were, among its sponsors, shrewd and powerful men whose vision foresaw more far-reaching possibilities in the plan than could be counted in immediate dollar-profits.

A fortune began to flow into public relations channels. More and more the public was led to accept the new method of propagation, and the foundation prospered. Branch nurseries were established from coast to coast, and the network even extended to outposts in other lands.

"Although here and there employees were bound to talk, little became generally known about the operation in these branches. Children were born in litters at five months, it was said, each identified as to parentage by a gene index developed by Strohm. But only a handful of key men were ever entrusted with the biochemical secret involved in adapting the animals.

"Meanwhile the foundation had grown in power, a power which began to be felt in political circles. Laws which favored its interests began to find their way into the books. Even then few people in this country foresaw its eventual objective. But, with the election of Cyrus Blackstone to the presidency seven years ago, and with him many new faces in Congress, the plot became apparent. The Gestation Bill was promptly introduced and, although it met with powerful opposition from widespread quarters, within two years it had been made a law.

"Under the provisions of this Act it became illegal for women after a period of one year from the date of its passage to bear children in the natural way. This, in effect, also outlawed the activities of the professional mothers. All offspring of citizens of the United States must be processed through the facilities of the foundation. Annual contraceptive injections were made mandatory for every female from the age of puberty, and these would be administered at government expense by any physician. A CC card was given with each injection, and all of you listening out there know what it means to be caught without one.

"Many riders, however, were attached to the bill. Every couple, re-

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gardless of race, creed, or financial standing, was to be allowed two children in addition to any already in the family. For more than two, an application had to be filed, to be passed on by a board of regents who were to take into consideration both the qualifications of the applicants and the national population statistics. This rider was aimed particularly to appease the farm bloc, since from time immemorial large families have been considered necessary to the economics of farming, and agricultural requests were to have a high priority. Then, too, fees were established and written into the law, based on a percentage of the parents' annual income. As it stands now, this amounts to one-tenth the yearly salary of the couple concerned. In the high brackets this comes to a considerable sum, as some of you well know."

Cyrus Blackstone shifted restlessly in his chair. Why was Pell wasting air time on these details? Surely, by this time, everyone knew all this.

But the commentor went deftly on. He catalogued fairly the advantages of the Act. Stabilization of the population, for instance. In the last hundred years the latter had climbed at a staggering rate and had reached a point by Blackstone's administration where the warnings of Malthus, Vogt and other long dead conservationists were no longer voices crying in the wilderness. As a solution for this pressing crisis, the Gestation Act won support from groups who otherwise would have opposed it.

At a stroke, the Act wiped out the mortality of mothers as a result of childbirth and, as the previous proxy motherhood had done for a few, it extended to every woman the advantages of dispensing with pregnancies. Strohm's gene analysis, too, made predetermination of sex possible, and (subject, of course, to fluctuations of national quotas) parents were generally permitted to have either a boy or a girl baby as they wished. In addition, although the ideal contraceptive had been perfected years before, the Act finally made it both available and compulsory for everyone, thus solving a situation in the low income groups that had harassed sociologists for centuries.

But, Pell continued, there was another side to the ledger. The Constitution guaranteed freedom of worship in America, yet this Act grossly went contrary to religious imperatives as few laws had ever done in the past. And despite millions of words of propaganda, it took a great deal of adjusting on the part of *all* groups to swallow the blow to esthetics it involved. Then, too, although the Act eliminated the age-old problem of unwed mothers, it unloosed a storm of protest from church people of all religions against the administering of contraceptives to adolescents.

But beyond and above all these, Pell said, were the American women, thousands upon thousands

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of them, who believed that every woman should have the right to bear her own offspring if she so desired. Producing children had been woman's supreme achievement since the dawn of the race, and no government, they said, should have the power to deprive them of this right. Leaders among these women —Catholic, Jew and Protestant alike—formed an organization, now known as the Pioneer Women of America, and their crusading gathered powerful support to their banners.

"Even now the White House and the Capitol, the Foundation Center and every one of its farflung branches is being picketed by these crusaders, Foundation employees are being pressed to quit their jobs, our statesmen are being deluged with messages of protest, and reams upon reams of opposition literature are pouring forth.

"In addition to all this, we are becoming increasingly aware of a widespread flouting of the law. Illegal births are being reported in mounting numbers, and how can we estimate the multitude that have been successfully concealed? There are indications that certain physicians have falsified CC cards, and evidence of a booming racket in forgery of these cards has been uncovered.

"I ask you now: Is the Foundation's empire tottering? Is President Blackstone's baby, the Gestation Act, to be discarded like the Volstead and Drew Acts, as an abortive attempt at progress? Will one more straw be sufficient in the public mind to break the camel's back? If you think so, then I have but one more question—and at the end of our talk tomorrow night I may give you the answer to that question."

Pell paused a brief moment before he asked gravely:

"Where is President Blackstone's wife?"

Blackstone viciously snapped off the switch. Could Sternmaker's prediction be true? There was one way of finding out. He reached for the V-fone.

But the President's decision came to naught. Xavier Pell could not be reached. "Keep trying," the executive said, "and call me at any hour." But no call came, and when he finally sought sleep long after midnight the question was still unresolved.

Bancroft reported shortly before noon the following day.

"We missed our party by a few hours," he said. "That Denver number belonged to a private fone service. Servo messages were forwarded immediately to another service in Colorado Springs. From there the trail led to a sanitarium."

Blackstone's eyes narrowed. "Sanitarium?"

"She was registered there as Mrs. Jeannette Johnson. She left for Philadelphia at dawn this morning."

"Philadelphia? That's strange. How about the other matter?"

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"The physician was Stanley Needles in Baltimore. Her card was issued on December eighth of last year. Any other instructions, sir?"

"Yes. I want Mrs. Blackstone traced—and keep me posted."

When Bancroft had gone, the executive began to pace the carpeting. If Beth had had her shot, how could she be pregnant? Still . . . sanitarium. The word had a nasty ring. Why would a person in perfect health choose a sanitarium in which to write a book? Unless—

A buzz interrupted his pacing. The operator announced Jules Sternmaker. The latter wasted no words.

"Cyrus, what have you done about taking care of the matter we discussed?"

For the first time in their long relationship, Blackstone was consciously nettled by the man. Why did he have to be so damned imperious?

"Your call was unnecessary," he said impatiently. "I'm handling the situation."

"Good. Then I won't have to dwell on the unpleasant consequences if certain facts are revealed to the public." There was ice in the big man's thin smile as the screen went dark.

The President's hands tightened into fists. Beth's words rang in his brain. *Was* he just a busboy for a gang of fat plutocrats? No, what they believed in, he believed in. What, then, was rankling him? Was it because, for the first time, their directives were invading his private life, his relationship with Beth? And Beth. Doubts nibbled at his mind. Could she have lied to him from the start?

The V-fone buzzed again. This time it was the long awaited call from Xavier Pell. For a moment the two men eyed each other levelly. When the President spoke his voice was more harsh than he had intended.

"Pell, you know I've used my influence many times to protect your right to speak the truth as you see it on the air. You claim to stand for progress and the betterment of this country. Why do you want to destroy one of the most socially enlightened forward steps in history?"

"If you're referring to the Gestation Act," Pell said evenly, "I don't consider it a forward step. Ehrlich Strohm's discovery was. That should explain my stand. I'll fight all forms of compulsory socialism as long as I can draw a breath."

A line hardened along the President's jaw. "One word from me and you can be silenced overnight. You can't be such a fool as not to realize that."

"I do realize it. But I'm also aware you'll never say that word. Let's call it a tribute to your integrity."

The President was not to be brushed aside. "Even integrity has its limits. Why are you dragging Mrs. Blackstone into this?"

"My business is news. At the

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moment your wife is news—as you should know. If you don't, I suggest you listen to my next broadcast."

Blackstone controlled his voice with an effort. "Pell, this is my final word. Other forces are at work. I'll accept no responsibility for what happens if you mention Mrs. Blackstone by name or allegation on your program tonight."

A wan smile played at the commentor's lips. "I'm sorry, Mr. President. I, too, have a measure of integrity." He made a gesture of farewell, and the screen was dark.

The afternoon brought no new report. At an important function that evening, an aide slipped a folded message into the chief executive's hand. It was from Bancroft.

"PARTY ON W A Y TO WASHINGTON. PERLEY AND GROVE FOLLOWING."

Blackstone crumpled the paper and thrust it in his pocket. Of what importance was finding Beth now? Pell was even now on the air, perhaps had already made his damning statement. Of course, with her arrival they could confront the commentor with his libel and gain a retraction—end his career, in fact—but the damage would be done. Millions would believe the original lie and ignore the retraction. Why hadn't he followed Sternmaker's advice and cracked down on the man?

As Blackstone waited for an opportunity to make a graceful exit, a pretext arose with the arrival of a second message. It was unsigned, but only one man in Washington could have dictated it.

"AM ON MY WAY TO WHITE HOUSE. BE THERE."

Just nine words. But they meant Pell had done it. They meant Sternmaker was in a rage. They meant he, Busboy Blackstone, would have to run home and take his whipping. They meant—

Oh, damnation!

By pleading an emergency, he broke away. As his limousine turned into Pennsylvania Avenue he heard the raucous cry of newsboys. With his heart beginning to pound, he directed Benson, his driver, to the curb. Shane, his security man, bought a paper and passed it back to him. It was the opposition Post-Bulletin, and under the masthead and "Extra" ears spread a huge banner that reached to the fold:

BETH PREGNANT,
PELL CHARGES

With blood pulsing at his temples, Blackstone stared at the headline. The President of the United States, the leader who had championed the move to end pregnancies, what was he now? History's greatest fool.

A cold rage began to well up in him. It was a lie, a lie. He threw the newspaper aside and spoke to Benson. Pell's office was nearby. He'd try there first. The man's apartment was farther out and could come later.

Lights burned in Xavier Pell's second floor suite, however, and

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Blackstone got out. Leaving his men below, he entered the building and took the lift. Pell was apparently alone. Grim-faced, the President stepped past him and waited as he closed the door.

Turning then, Blackstone said ominously: "This will finish you. You know that?"

"Possibly."

"You'll be thrown to the dogs. What evidence do you have to support this madness?"

Pell weighed the demand momentarily, then moved to a safe in one wall and inserted his thumb in the photo-niche. "Enough, I think."

From inside the safe he withdrew an envelope which he handed to Blackstone without a word. The latter, with fingers that suddenly became clumsy, pulled out four snapshots. Each pictured the same woman, a woman who, from angle and pose, was unaware she was being photographed. They were unmistakably of Beth. And they revealed plainly that she was big with child.

"But this—but these—" Blackstone failed to complete his protest. Still unable to tear his eyes from the pictures, he slumped weakly into a chair.

"They were taken," Pell explained, with more pity than triumph in his voice, "by an attendant in a Colorado Springs sanitarium. If you will note the other women in the background you'll realize it's actually a hideaway for the enciente. I have reason to believe places like this are springing up like weeds from coast to coast."

The President made no reply. His face looked suddenly haggard, and a measure of life seemed to have fled his big frame.

As Pell turned to a cabinet and withdrew a bottle of Bourbon and two glasses, Blackstone raised dull eyes. "Photographs can be doctored," he said in a voice already convinced it was a straw not worth grasping. "If these are really what they seem, you also know the name she was using."

Pell measured the liquor as if the future of the world depended on his exactitude. "I know that, too," he said. "Jeannette Johnson."

He proffered the drink and was forced to all but close the other's fingers around the glass. The President stared at the liquor for a moment, then tossed it off and rose to his feet. Wordlessly, he left the building, scant seconds before the arrival of another car.

Blackstone reached the White House to find Jules Sternmaker in the library. Eddies of cigar smoke indicated the length of time he had been waiting. Somehow, the Foundation man seemed more huge, more forbidding than Blackstone had ever remembered.

"You're late, Cyrus."

Resentment stirred within the President. "Does it matter?" he countered bitterly.

"This will be our last talk, Cyrus," the voice was velvety.

"What do you mean by that?"

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It was incredible that Sternmaker would bow out under pressure.

"I will not mince words. For a time I felt that if we could reach your wife we might still forestall most of the effects of Pell's broadcast. An abortion could have been performed, and she could have appeared on the networks to pooh-pooh this whole thing. It's now too late for that. An agent just spoke to me from Philadelphia. Your wife was seen there—*by a photographer.* Her picture on tomorrow's newswires will be evidence we can't brush off."

"Abortion?" Blackstone repeated, as if the remainder of the statement had gone unheard. "She'd never do it." He remembered the discussions they had had on the subject of children, which both of them had so desired. But Beth had been adamant. She would bear her own—or there would be none at all.

"Well, it's idle to discuss it. There's no point in postponing the inevitable. You realize, don't you, that your own position is untenable?"

Blackstone looked at him incredulously. "You mean you're suggesting I resign from office?"

"Not at all," Sternmaker said, as he inserted his cigar in the disposal and rose to his feet. His right hand brought forth something from an inside pocket, and he moved toward the President's desk. His voice was as calm as if he were discussing the merits of a new bond issue. "You have been a good boy, Cyrus, but this is the end of the road."

Stunned, Blackstone stared at the gun which suddenly lay on the plasteel surface.

"I'm leaving now," the big man said. "Tomorrow the world will learn you've had a heart attack. Don't worry, we have another good boy, and the work will go on. Believe me, this is the only way."

The words funneled down into Blackstone's consciousness. This, then, was the method of the great Foundation: If an individual objected to the Plan, brush him aside. If he were a hindrance, eliminate him. But, hadn't this been his own credo from the beginning? Why wait for progress, he had said. Execute it cleanly and swiftly with a stroke of the pen. Let the nonconformists adjust to it or perish. Radical change may be harsh for the few, but the eventual benefit for the many makes it worth the sacrifice. With sudden clarity he saw himself from a standpoint never apparent before.

Sternmaker was already turning away when the buzzer broke the silence. With volition of its own, the President's finger pressed the button on his desk and the door swung open. Shane, standing on the threshold, stepped aside to reveal the woman waiting behind him.

It was Beth, her brown eyes wide in tragic appeal, her lips partly open in expectancy.

The President stared at her. They

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had been apart for months and his first impulse was to rush forward and embrace her. But her figure starkly bore out the evidence of the photographs, and the enormity of what she had done rose as a barrier in his mind.

Beth, sensing in his conflict some shred of hope, ran to him with a cry on her lips. "Cy, Cy," she pleaded, "I didn't want it to happen this way."

As she clung, sobbing, to his shoulders, he felt a new emotion stirring within him, and his arms tightened around her.

Jules Sternmaker looked on unmoved. "A touching scene," he commented. "I'm sure you have no need of me."

At his voice, Beth's body tensed. Then, as he turned to go, she broke from Cyrus's arms. "Wait," she said. "I've things to say and you might as well hear them now. You think you're the Lord of Gestation! Well, your wonderful Act is dead. By tomorrow it'll be a ridiculous farce."

She turned to Cyrus with a rush of words. "Do you know why I came here tonight? I didn't want to. I didn't want you to see me until after . . . until it was all over. But I came anyway, because I knew you'd need me, and because I thought I'd be in time to keep things from happening the way they did. You see, I knew Erida—Mrs. Pell—was in Philadelphia, and I went there to persuade her to fly here with me to stop Xavier's broadcast. By giving him bigger news, we were sure he'd postpone the whole thing a few more days. But, well, we were just too late."

Both men were eyeing her. "What bigger news?" Sternmaker asked softly.

"The women." Beth tried to keep triumph from her voice as she locked eyes with the Foundation man. "American women. Pioneer Women. While you were so busy destroying their pamphlets, they were *really* working underground. Who do you think fill the hypos for half a million doctors? Nurses and assistants! And who are they? Women! And what do you think they've been putting in the CC hypos for months and months . . . while they poured your contraceptives down the drain?"

Sternmaker gave no indication he was prepared for the impact of her next words.

"Saline solution."

The huge man's control was beyond flaw. "What makes you think this is true?" he asked bleakly.

"Does it matter? The whole world will know tomorrow. Erida Pell told me on the way down. She's with her husband now. The Pioneer Women weren't ready to let it out, and even Xavier didn't know. But now, well . . . within four months probably two million natural babies will be born in this country—to Senators' wives, Governors' wives, truck drivers' wives, ditch diggers' wives. Does your

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Foundation have an answer to that?"

The President found his voice. "But, Beth—"

His question was never finished.

The buzzer sounded, and once more the door swung open in response to the button. Shane, looking uncomfortable, held a small, dark-haired woman by the arm. He was about to explain when Beth cried out sharply and ran to the door. "Erida! What's happened?"

Pell's wife, her face a frightened mask, shook Shane off and stepped into the room. She was breathless, her lips bloodless, her eyes bright with a strange wildness. Ignoring the others, her gaze snapped to the Foundation man and she moved toward him, her fingers opening and closing like claws.

She spoke through bared teeth. "I knew I'd find you here."

Beth, close at her side and tugging at her forearm, failed to slow Erida's advance. "Erida. Tell me," she b e g g e d . "What is it? What's—"

Sternmaker was backing away now, aloofly annoyed in the presence of such uncontrolled emotion.

"He's dead." The gritty edge on Erida's voice revealed how close she was to hysteria. "Xavier's dead. He—he died in my arms, murdered by your—"

Beth, using both hands now, clutched Erida tightly and tried to swing her around. The women were beside the President's desk at the moment, and Erida's eye caught the deadly glint of metal. With a movement swift as a striking snake she snatched up the gun that lay there.

She whirled toward Sternmaker, but Beth's one hand was clamped on her wrist while she wrenched the weapon away with the other. Erida's fingers were again on the gun in an instant—an instant that triggered death into the gross body of Jules Sternmaker.

With the harsh report, the two women and the President halted, transfixed. Only Sternmaker moved as, with a look of hurt incredulity on his face, he slumped slowly to the floor.

The door buzzer began to rasp violently and, the spell broken, Blackstone rushed to the stricken man's side. The latter's lips began to move, soundlessly at first. When the words did come they were halting, but amazingly distinct.

"The . . . stupidity . . . of women," the big man said. And then, as if this satisfied him somehow, he died.

Hours later, with the body removed and distasteful formalities completed for the time being, Beth lay with her head pillowed on her husband's arm, while he murmured to her for the tenth time: "Go to sleep, darling. It was technically an accident. You tried to save him. Shane's taking care of everything, and Mrs. Pell may not even be arraigned. It's better if you try to forget the whole affair."

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"It isn't that. I was wondering what you thought . . . about our baby."

She waited for him to reply, but his silence spurred her to hurry on.

"Please believe me, Cyrus. The day I found out was the most terrible day of my life. I thought of running away forever. I thought of suicide. I thought of horrible things. I needed you terribly, and I couldn't tell you. The wife of the President—pregnant. I didn't know then about the others, or about the saline solution. I'd had my shot, and I thought I must be some horrible freak. You knew how much I wanted babies, and I was afraid you'd think I'd done it deliberately.

"I thought I'd lose you. And the publicity—it would have ruined you. Oh, darling what could I do? Abortion was unthinkable. I racked my brains for days and days. Then finally I poured out my troubles to an old friend I could trust, and together we worked out a plan. She made the arrangements, even for taking care of the baby after it was born. I felt sure if we could only keep it a secret, sooner or later the time would come when I could tell you, and we could claim it.

"And about the book. I really did work on one, partly to pass the time, but mostly so I wouldn't be lying to you. And then, well, Pell got detectives working and . . . oh, everything's gone wrong!"

But as she buried her face on his chest, and Cyrus's arms stole around her in a certain familiar way, she suddenly knew that, whatever tomorrow would bring, some things—the important ones—had gone right.

Among the Contributors to This Month's SAINT *are*

LESLIE CHARTERIS,
with "The Unfortunate Financier"

VAN WYCK MASON,
with "The Plum-Colored Corpse"

OCTAVUS ROY COHEN,
with "The Bridal-Night Murder"

BEN HECHT,
with "A Sort of a Story"

JULIAN SYMONS,
with "Death in a Bathroom"

and many others

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wireroad

by . . . Lee Correy

A lonely grave marker in the lunar waste need not be the final resting place of a man. His spirit may go marching on.

WHEN THE QUAKE hit, it set everybody in Dianaport hard on the floor.

I managed to regain my footing after the worst of the shocks had passed. I waited deliberately, knowing it would be senseless to try to keep my feet while the really violent shaking was in progress. The first thing I did after the room had quieted down was to dash for the phone. Half-hoping the lines had not been cut by the quake, I dialed the dispatcher's office.

"Dianaport and Geiger Hill Wireroad, dispatcher! Jones speaking," a basso voice cracked back.

"This is Mike, Hank," I snapped. "Report! Are the wires down?"

"Don't know, Chief," Hank Jones said. "We're checking the division points now."

"Check all the section points, too," I told him. "And get an exact report of the damage! I'm coming right down!"

"Better walk, Chief. The slidewalks have stopped all over the

A construction worker on the moon proud of his calling would almost certainly be a stranger to boredom all the days of his life. There'd be bridges to build and a hundred shining new Rubicons to cross. They'd be singing and rejoicing on the good days, with every moment of relaxation an adventure in itself, every triumph a wonder to be shared. And even the bad days would be miraculously transformed by a glow from the high mountain peaks, and a friendship as steadfast as the stars. When a work of imaginative fiction makes you exclaim, "I was there!" you've paid it a high tribute indeed. All hail, then, to Lee Correy!

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city," Hank replied, cautioning me. "It's the worst quake we've had here on the Moon—or so said a selenologist who was just up here. We've got two hundred people stranded on the walks of the terminal down here."

"Okay," I said. "Let 'em walk to their trains! But don't give the varnish a green board over freight consists. We'll be needing supplies more than people after this thing! I'm on my way!"

Slamming down the phone, I raced for the door. The moonquake had thrown the jamb out of alignment, so I had to break it down. As I started off at a dead run down the street, taking ten-meter leaps, I had only one thing on my mind —the wireroad.

The quake had hit us right in the middle of our early evening rush hour at Dianaport. Shifts were changing at the spaceport, at the hydroponics plants, and at the power stations—not to mention the hundred other industries at Dianaport.

The locals were running full; they always do. In addition, we had our four crack limiteds waiting the high ball for Crater City, Aristarcus, Hanson, and Geiger Hill within the hour. If the lines were down anywhere, wireroad service would grind to a halt on that particular division, and the dozens of lunar communities which depended upon the wireroad for supplies would be isolated.

The wireroad was the artery of life for the Lunar Protectorate. There was no getting around it.

It's not easy to move heavy freight or large numbers of people over the surface of the Moon. Even on the comparatively level *maria,* it's tough going for tracked or wheeled vehicles.

The Moon's surface is a morass of deep, soft pumice, crevasses, and rugged mountains which make the terrestrial Alps look downright silly. Sure, supplies can be brought in by rocket or dropped from orbit. But not everywhere, and it's an expensive and impractical proposition when a method of surface transportation can do the job.

Rocket drops were impractical for other reasons, too. The whole Lunar Protectorate was an immense complex, almost self-sufficient now. All the oxygen, food, and sundries that go out to the little lunar dome towns are produced at Dianaport and other large centers.

The object of the Protectorate and the big brother UN earthside has always been to get the colony on its feet as quickly as possible. Old colonial theory doesn't work . . . not for us. We must produce as much as we can ourselves; it's too expensive to haul it out from Earth. We use our credit from the export of rare minerals and ores for the things we *can't* make.

But the success of any complex depends upon the transportation available. Earth had her airlines and steamships and railroads. Lunar had her wireroads, overhead wires bear-

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ing cars and containing many principles of its earthbound cousin, the railroad.

That was my job—to keep the wireroads running. As I hurried through the corridors of Dianaport, I was wondering if any of the towers were down, or if any of the high-iron cables had parted.

The quake had made a mess of the beautiful underground warren of Dianaport. Walls were cracked and falling and rubble lay everywhere. The environment crews were probably having a rough time of it elsewhere trying to repair the inevitable cracks in the exterior domes and bulkheads. But that was not my worry at the moment. Unless, of course, the dome gave way entirely, in which case I might find myself decidedly short of breath.

The dispatcher's office in the upper level of the terminal was a beehive of activity, and there was a terrific human traffic jam on the motionless slidewalks below. The station master and his gang had their hands full. Henry Jones was seated before the master dispatcher's desk overlooking the central traffic control center spread out below it. I went over and quietly slid into a seat next to him.

"Report," I told him, trying to get the feel of the situation as quickly as possible. Not the terminal situation, but the thousands of kilometers of wireroad strung over the Moon.

Hank's ebony face showed momentary surprise before his white teeth flashed in a grin. "You scared me, Chief," he said. "I never thought you'd make it this soon. Want to take over?"

"It's your shift," I replied. "Report!"

He did so. It wasn't as bad as I had expected. The moonquake had been severe along the lunar fault lines all over this general area of the Moon. But our wireroads did not lie entirely within these quake belts.

One of the cables on the four-wire main line to the spaceport over the Pumice Patch grade was down, but the block signals of the CTC had halted the eastbound trains before they had hit the break. The westbound line to Crater City was in fair shape.

A few of the towers had shifted a bit, but the line was passable and the trains were running by the time card. The southbound line had gotten it the worst with only one wire still up all the way to Hesiodus; trains were running, but only at reduced speeds. The Hesiodus division was a dispatcher's nightmare.

But the mountain division into the rough country around Geiger Hill northeast of Tycho was in bad shape. Division point control at Hesiodus and section points reported towers down and cables snapped for kilometers along the main. The Hesiodus division point yards were a mess. The wire crews from Hesiodus and Stag's Head

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Pass were on the lines working toward each other in an attempt to clear some of the trouble.

"How about the rest of the line into Geiger Hill?" I asked. That was rough country, and was probably right in the heart of the quake. The wireroad wound through those mountains like a snake, spanning gorges and diving into tunnels through the ridges.

"No report from Geiger Hill yet," Hank told me.

"With the lines down, they can't get to us on the carrier system," I told him. "Try the emergency radio net through the relay at Hesiodus." I stopped only to light a quick cigarette before diving in to help him with the mess on the Hesiodus division and the tie-up over Pumice Patch Grade to the spaceport.

It was an hour before the report came through from Geiger Hill, and the radio link had to go through Divana Space Station because there were no microwave relay towers in operation between Geiger Hill and Hesiodus.

"Hello, Chief? Thank God!" Bill Henderson's voice came through. "We need air, and we need it bad!"

"Take it easy, Bill," I broke in to ask him. "What happened?"

"The main dome burst!"

"Oh, Lord!" I breathed. Hank was plugged in on the circuit, too. I saw a worried look creep over his face.

"And we've lost about two thousand people. Some had their quarters sealed and lived through it, and the self-sealing compartment doors saved a lot more. But you can't really go anywhere safely without a pressure suit."

"How are your air reserves up there?" I asked him.

"We're good for about forty-eight hours. Can you get some supplies in to us?"

Forty-eight hours! That didn't leave much time. The advertised time from Dianaport—where we would have to load a train—to Geiger Hill was twenty-three hours, and if the wires were down in the mountain division, we would be pressed for time. "How does the high wire look to the north of you, Bill?" I asked. "Can we get a special through?"

"Not now," he said. "The yard's a mess. The two sections north of here report the CTC went out and the blocks failed. Three locals dropped off the wire and we had a cornfield meet just south of Air Bottle Gorge. One of the freights that met was hauling ten cars of air—our reserve supply for the next two weeks. Big Bend Tunnel and Crumbly Cut are blocked—just how bad we don't know yet. But there are other tunnels out, too."

"Hold on, Bill," I told him, and took a look at the traffic board below me. There had been five thousand people at Geiger Hill before the quake. It was a boom town,

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had been ever since the Tycho uranium strike two years ago.

We had managed to hang a wireroad in there by the skin of its teeth. Geiger Hill was in some of the roughest country on the Moon, located in the great mountain massif near Tycho. We'd had to tunnel and span and use some of the steepest grades ever used on a wireroad. The lunar gravity had helped somewhat; we could span tremendous distances and use terrific grades.

But if the tunnels were blocked and some of the long spans were down, we were sunk. We couldn't even get an inspection car into Geiger Hill, much less a heavy relief train of at least a hundred cars.

"We can pull the wire crews off the western and northern divisions," Hank pointed out, reading my thoughts which were probably very evident on my face. "The trains are running there."

"I know, but we may have to rebuild the whole mountain division into Geiger Hill," I replied, still studying the board. "And we've got only two days to do it in. Don't forget, it took us six months to hang the wire in there before."

"How about a rocket drop?"

"Are you kidding, Hank? You know that country up there. There isn't even a place level enough to drop a brick, and those boys would have to climb all over the hills to find the stuff . . . and they never would get it all! Landing a supply rocket is simply out of the question. They never figured for a spaceport up there, and you couldn't land a butterfly wheels-up in those mountains."

It wouldn't take ten minutes for the news of the Geiger Hill disaster to get around, and I knew who would be called upon to get relief to them—*us*. We were the only ones who could get to them, if they could be reached at all. You have to know the lunar topography to really appreciate that fact.

So I started to set things up in advance. Picking up my radio conversation with Bill Henderson again, I told him, "We're coming in after you. Stay on this connection. It's our only communication with you. Get all your gandy dancers on the high wire. Clear and fix all you can, but at least get one wire up as far as it will go. We'll start working toward you as fast as we can."

We had to give a lot of orders after that. I called the Protectorate headquarters and the Red Cross. The Space Force called me, saying they were going to go ahead and attempt to make a drop. But I knew they couldn't get all the necessary supplies to them. Meanwhile, Hank was calling in the pick of the wire gangs from the western and northern divisions, and setting up extras for them with clear boards all the way to Dianaport or Hesiodus.

I suspended all regular passen-

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ger service on the Hesiodus and mountain divisions—if there was any—and flipped the order boards to hold everything except freights. In the process of setting up the orders for the southbound mercy train and work train, the Protectorate called and wanted to hang on some medical cars. I slipped them into the consist. The mercy train was to high-ball in forty minutes . . . a fast job for all hands.

"Call in your supernumerary, Hank," I told him finally. "Or get the man on the next shift to take over here. Set up new shifts if you have to, because we won't be around."

"Eh? How come?" he asked.

"We're grabbing our pressure suits and leg irons and hopping the mercy extra out of here. We'll pick up the work train at Hesiodus. Move! We've got forty-seven hours and thirty minutes!"

Hank didn't ask questions. Of all the men working for the Dianaport and Geiger Hill Wireroad, we knew the mountain division between us the way a blind man knows his house. The big Negro had bossed the wire crews when we'd put the line in there, and I'd been chief engineer.

The fact that we'd been booted upstairs to the chief dispatcher's office wasn't due to the fact that we didn't need engineers and wire bosses, but because there was a general shortage of people on Lunar, period. But it hadn't hurt me a bit. I still remembered every little detail of what I'd considered a fine engineering job. And Hank— Well, he had personally set the charges in every tunnel we'd bored.

I guess we both should have been born when the narrow gauge railroads were climbing into the Colorado Rockies two hundred years ago. We could have had a ball. But we had the kind of railroading we liked, although somewhat different, here on the Moon.

I didn't bother going home for my toothbrush. I doubted if I could have found it anyway with my bachelor's diggings churned up the way they were because of the quake. But Hank went, and Polly came back with him to see him off.

The terminal was a little crowded when I got down there with my pressure suit on and the faceplate open. People were everywhere. Freight handlers were still loading cars with slim cylinders of oxygen under pressure and parcels of food and medicine. A rotund little yard switcher coupled on ten tank cars of water, causing the whole train to jump as the couplers met. I made my way forward to the engine and hailed Jess Younger, the engineer.

"You own the wireroad to Hesiodus, Jess," I told him. "Turn a wheel, man."

"How's the wires holding?"

"Good to Lava Heights, but we may have to slow for wire crews going into Hesiodus. I don't need to tell you to forget the advertised.

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For every minute you cut off it, I'll buy you a beer."

"It's a deal!" Jess grinned. He turned to look at the square silver bulk of 468, the fastest and most powerful road switcher we had. "She ain't been backshopped for two weeks, but she'll turn a wheel, all right," he said. "She was tuned tight last time."

"Fine! I'll ride in the cab with you."

"I may be needing the chief delayer with me if I put her high-heeled shoes on today!" the engineer remarked as he checked his watch. "Five minutes!" Shoving his watch back in his pocket, he clambered up the gangway steps to the cab and started making his brake checks.

Hank showed up within a minute. He was in his pressure suit, too, and Polly and his two kids were with him. I always got a kick out of Hank's kids; they sometimes made me wish I had a couple of my own. There weren't a pair of more active, bright-eyed kids in Dianaport. Today, both the little boy and the little girl were dressed in their best blue moonsuits to watch their daddy go off to rescue Geiger Hill.

Polly looked worried as she kissed Hank good-bye. She knew he was going back into the tunnels, and she'd never liked that in the first place. But she knew what had happened at Geiger Hill, and she didn't say a word. It was in her eyes, though.

Back by the crummy, the conductor raised his hand lantern. The cry of "'Board!" echoed down the train. I swung up to the cab of 468 behind Hank and sealed the door behind us. As I squirmed up on the left seatbox, Jess pressurized the train and turned on his lights. The big headlight burned against the doors in front of us, while the big Mars light formed its figure-eight pattern as it swung.

Noting the time, Jess signaled for the terminal doors to open. The platform had been cleared and everybody was now either in the train or behind the pressure-tight gates. The doors swung back to reveal the brilliant lunar landscape as Jess cracked the throttle and eased forward to take slack. Then he nudged the throttle forward, urging current to the four series-wound bi-polar motors, and we emerged into the cobweb of wires in the Dianaport yards.

Wire crews were still patching on the towers supporting the overhead cables. But Jess paid no attention to them, laying on his horn with fervor as he cracked the throttle even more. Whistles and air horns don't work at all in a vacuum, of course, but anybody working near a wireroad has to have a pressure suit on, and a pressure suit has a radio. A mere blast of wide-band rf energy cutting through a suit radio was enough to warn anybody.

"Green board!" Jess cried as we approached the interlock tower.

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"Green board!" I called back.

Then we were on the main southbound wire. Jess checked his rectifiers and kept a sharp eye on the current as he opened her up, taking advantage of the eighty kilometers of tangent wire with no grades ahead. I saw the lights of Patrick's Roost sweep by and called the clear board to Jess, then sat back while Jess rolled the 468.

Within minutes, he had the big road switcher to the full speed her gearing would allow—about two-fifty kilometers per hour. I tried to relax, watching the towers sweep forward and pass overhead. The ring of the wires as it passed through the trucks made the whole cab sing, interrupted only by the *click . . . click . . . click* of the tower joints. Sparks danced around the pantograph while the ignitron rectifiers filled the whole cab with their beating hum. The 468 swept over Mare Nubium like an earthside bird, diving down the long catenaries between the towers while the train rocked with the speed in a gentle sideways pendulum motion.

In spite of the fact that we were in for trouble on this run, I was enjoying myself. I guess I just like to ride the train.

Hank took a perch on the big cable duct running through the cab and proceeded to discuss some of the probable trouble we would run into. Together, we tried to postulate what spans might be down and which tunnels blocked, all this from our knowledge of the fault lines and the location and foundation rock of the towers and tunnels.

"Big Bend's blocked for certain," I reminded him. A light flashed toward me, and I called to Jess, "Green!"

"Green!"

"Yeah, and that one is sure a brute, Chief. I never did like that compound curve under that mountain, not with that crumbly basalt she's bored through."

"We had to do it to get the proper easements, Hank," I told him.

"I know, Chief . . . but I don't have to like it," Hank replied with a dark look. "That hole was nearly the death of me once. I hope they get it cleared before we hit it."

"Slim chance," I said. "They're short of men—and short of air."

"So we'll have to tackle Big Bend," the big Negro growled. Then he started humming:

"When John Henry was seven years old,
Sitting on his father's knee,
He said, 'The Big Bend Tunnel on the C and O road
Is goin' to be the death of me . . .'"

"Cut it out, Hank!" I snapped. "This is no time for your screwy sense of humor—and this is Lunar!"

"Green!" Jess called.

I barely saw it. "Green!"

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"Chief, I'm going to be drunk for a week. We're twenty-six minutes ahead of the advertised!" the engineer chortled.

We made it to Hesiodus seventy-eight minutes ahead of the advertised, and I ordered Jess and the 468 to uncouple and take the work train that was in the hole waiting for us. Jess was one of the best engineers on the D & GH, and knew the mountain division. Hank and I stayed in the cab with him.

It was a long climb up out of the crater on a steep grade with long catenaries, but the 468 didn't lose her footing once. Into the hills, we had to stop twice while our wire gangs helped the regular section crews splice the high wire. Once we had to shim a tower or risk scraping the side of a cut. But then the going got easier as we wound through the craterlets southeast of Hesiodus. The towers there had been anchored in solid bedrock.

We couldn't see the wire very well from the cab of 468 because of the wire car and jib boom coupled on ahead, so Hank and I went out and rode the handrails on the lead car once we got into the more rugged terrain.

I tried to take stock of our remaining time. The run from Dianaport to Hesiodus had taken ten hours and twenty-seven minutes. We'd lost thirty-seven minutes there getting organized, shuffling engines, and getting the work train on the high wire ahead of the mercy extra. Our total time from the moment Bill had told us of the forty-eight-hour remaining air was, from the moment we'd left Hesiodus, twelve hours and nine minutes. And we were two hours and forty-one minutes out of Hesiodus by my watch. We had about thirty-three hours left.

I could still get through to Geiger Hill with the wireroad carrier system to Dianaport and through the radio relay from there. Bill was hanging on. They had the wire up through Hallucination Valley; that was progress. And the Space Force drop had been fairly successful. Geiger Hill had recovered enough air supply to put another wire crew on the main to help.

It wasn't as tight as it had been, but Geiger Hill couldn't keep going on supply drops.

This whole situation meant that medium centers of population were going to have to have their own air systems so they would not be so utterly dependent upon an outside source. Up to now, we'd been expanding too rapidly on Lunar to do it. And of course the D & GH directors were going to scream at the loss of revenue. But you can't play games with human life.

It also meant that we were going to have to re-design and rework some of our wireroad techniques in case we ever got another quake of this intensity again.

Then we found two spans down. It took an hour apiece to get them back up, sending men across the

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gully with a winch to pull over the new cable. I put the gangs from the western division on that job; spans were their everyday meat. I was saving the rest of the crews for the tunnels.

But the first dozen tunnels we poked cautiously through turned out to be clear. They were cut through solid, unfaulted rock. Hank had expected them to be clear. But then we ran into a series of short honeymoon tunnels hanging on the side of Andrews Gorge. They were down, and the wire with them.

We cleaned them out with explosives, Hank setting the charges. When they were clean, we made deep cuts out of some, strung the wire through them on jury-rigged crossbars, and put them behind us.

Twenty-seven hours left. I finally had to go back to the dormitory car, take off my suit, and get some rest. A man can stay in a suit only so long, then he fags out completely. But Hank seemed inexhaustible. He stayed out and bossed the crews while I got two hours' sleep. I corked off, breathing a silent prayer that our hurried wire jobs would hold the weight of the mercy train on our tail. But we had good crews, the pick of the best wire gangs on the D & GH.

When I sat up and pulled the fog away from my face, I found Hank sitting in the dorm car having a cup of coffee. The train was clipping along, swaying and complaining. It was music to my ears, but it also caused me to wonder. I joined Hank after drawing a cup of joe for myself, and asked him, "Where are we?"

"Just out of Boomer's Paradise." There were haggard lines around his eyes as he carefully sipped his coffee. "This section is in good shape. The section crews have been out on the wire. I sent them home. They did a good job and we're clear almost to Relay Hill."

I looked at my watch. Twenty-four hours and thirty minutes left. "We'll never make it, Hank," I told him. "Even if we had wire up all the way."

"Sure, we will," he said, with conviction.

Grabbing my suit out of its locker, I advised him, "Get some sleep."

He merely nodded and dropped his head to the table, out like a light.

Forty minutes later, he was out on the boom car with me. We hit a tunnel, completely blocked. So he went in for a look.

"This is a shorty, Chief. Send in the diggers." Fifteen minutes later, he called again, "Just a rock fall. Let me have the wire crews." This I did, and it was only a matter of twenty minutes before he called out, "Okay, wire is up. Come in, but take it slow. Check for clearances as you come. Pick me up at the other portal."

I signaled Jess, and the work train crept slowly forward. The brilliant floods on the boom car

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illuminated the long tunnel ahead, and I kept my eyes open, checking clearance as we went. It was a tight hole now, one that would have to be posted for a slow board to keep the cars from swinging against the walls. But Hank had opened her. He was good on tunnel work. Coming out, I had Jess slow even more so we could pick up Hank.

"We'll do okay now for awhile," he told me as his suited form swung up the grab steps. "The long spans are coming up. We'll make it!"

And he was right. The wireroad now ran from ridge to ridge, girdling the gorges in mighty sweeps of spans. The transport wires we used in pairs were five centimeters in diameter and wound of strands and as such, they were fairly flexible. The towers were long distances apart, and the shock of a shifting tower was less likely to break the wire.

At the top of each ridge, we slowed to check the span, then proceeded across at speed. If you think a spaceship flight is spectacular, take the wireroad run into Geiger Hill late in the lunar day. The gorges, several thousand feet deep, were in perfect blackness. In many cases, the wire and towers on the other side of the span were also in darkness. It gave one the awful feeling of pushing off into absolutely nothing and flying through space.

Leaving my best snapper wireman to watch the wire, Hank and I went back to the dorm car. Hank needed the break. I could tell he was dead tired, worn almost to the point of exhaustion. For some reason, his powerful physique refused to give in. But it showed on his face and in his attitude. He had changed his outlook on our chances of getting into Geiger Hill on time. I had too.

"We *might* make it, Hank, if the rest of the division is in as good shape as this. Fifteen hours left, and we're about a hundred kilometers from Geiger hill."

"Not with Big Bend blocked," the Negro remarked solemnly. "And I'll be willing to bet the six bores this side of it are blocked solid. The rock is a crumbly basalt from here to Geiger Hill—almost soft enough to drive steel into by hand. This rock structure was all broken up in the formation of the craters and mountains here."

"How's our nitro supply?"

"It's okay. But I don't think I want to send the demo crews in to blast in that type of rock. Remember the hell we had when we hung the wire in here first? The charge sometimes brings the whole works down around your ears. But . . . if we blast, I'll be setting the charges. I did it before, and no one on the demo crews has worked this stuff before."

The sound of the wire running through the overhead trucks changed pitch. I slipped my helmet on. "Sounds like Jess has run into

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something," I said. "Let's get outside."

Jess had. It was the first of the six tunnels Hank had mentioned. And, true to his prediction, it was corked like a bottle. The crews worked on it for two solid hours. They got it clear, but had to reanchor the wire in the rock. So we waited another hour while the quick-sets dried.

That was a long hour.

And it was the same for the next four tunnels. Rock sonar showed them caved tight.

We had four hours left when we struggled through the last one. "I don't like it, Chief," Hank told me. "These were all shorties compared to Big Bend . . . and she's coming up next."

There was rock powder all over his suit and smeared across his face plate, but he wiped it clean and managed a tired grin. "We've got a fifty-fifty chance. Have you heard from Geiger Hill yet?"

I hadn't, so I tried for another contact. This time, Bill Henderson came through with a strange echo. "Hold it, Bill!" I told him. "We're so close now that we're getting your ground wave. Let me get off this carrier net." I did so, and we talked directly.

"Our crews are working on Big Bend," he reported to me. "But we haven't got enough air to put a full crew in there. Hurry, Chief! The air around here is getting stinking."

After cutting off, I checked my own air bottles on my suit, and asked Hank, "How's your air?"

He checked his bottles. "Three hours."

"Okay, just watch it. Here comes Big Bend. We get through, and the wire is up all the way to the Hill."

But Big Bend was blocked solid. It was impossible to tell by rock sonar just how badly it was corked. Big Bend cut through the ridge on a compound curve with easements on both ends. On the sonar scopes, it was like looking at a solid mountain. And solid mountain on the Moon is murder!

We put everything we had into the bore. Hank went ahead with the demo crews, and I followed with the wire hands. And behind us, Jess crept along with the 468. Right on his heels came the mercy extra with its precious cargo.

"Fire in the hole!" Hank called. "The boys are coming back now. I'll touch her off."

"Watch yourself, Hank," I warned him. "This rock acts like pea gravel."

Then I got all the wire crews down off the train scaffolds, and we grabbed something—anything—and held tight. The shock of an expanding gas envelope in a vacuum retains most of its punch in a closed bore because there is no atmosphere to steal energy from it. Shocks have been known to be bad enough to pick a man right off his feet. If he gets thrown into sharp rocks, his pressure suit may

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sustain a hole. And a flat with a pressure suit isn't funny.

In the bright glare of the floods, the demolition crew showed up. I couldn't see Hank around the bend ahead, so I called, "All set here! Blow it!"

Hank was firing with fuzes instead of electrical det blocks because he was working staggered charges. "Okay, here we go! Hot fuze!"

I barely saw his running form bounding down the tunnel before the first charge went in a flash of blinding light. Then all hell broke loose ahead of us. Multiple shocks pounded us. Rocks fell from the ceiling. And Big Bend collapsed ahead of us in a shower of falling rock.

Men shouted all around us.

The train swayed as the quicksets holding the wire threatened to drop free. But they held. "Hank! Hank!" I screamed into my radio.

"Easy, Chief," he called back, his voice weak probably from the inability of his suit transmitter to get through the rock. "I'm in a pocket."

"Can you spot a landmark? How far in are you?"

"About two hundred meters ahead of you."

The rock fall came within ten meters of the boom car. A hundred and eighty meters of rock now lay between us and Hank.

"Stay put!" I ordered him. "Conserve your air. We're going to start digging. What do your bottle gauges say?"

"Oh, about two and a . . . Oh-oh! Rock fragment took me. I've got only part of an hour bottle left!"

"Stay where you are! Lie down! Relax!" I turned to the crews on the boom car. "Shake a leg and get busy!"

I'd never done much tunnel work before, but I got out with the crews and started digging myself. We didn't blast again; I didn't want to chance another rock fall. The rock was so crumbly I could almost dig it with my hands. But there was a lot of it, and it was tightly compacted in many places.

Dig! I told myself. *A man is trapped in there!*

After thirty minutes of verish work, I heard Hank's voice call, "I can hear you digging, Chief. You must be within fifty meters of me by now. But get the transit man to check his last sight; you're missing me to the left."

I did, and we started digging anew when Hank called again, "Look, Chief, how much time have we left?"

"Just over an hour . . ."

"Okay, I can hear someone digging from the other side. It must be the crews from Geiger Hill. I must be within a hundred meters of them. Keep digging toward me, and I'll start working toward them."

"You stay put and conserve your air."

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"Look, you're practically on top of me. Bring along a couple spare bottles. I'm digging toward Geiger Hill."

"Do as you're told!" I fired at him.

"I'm digging. Too many people are depending on that mercy train." Then he cut off.

We broke through to him in twenty minutes . . . and we found him at the far end of the pocket. I couldn't tell from the color of his skin, but his lips were blue.

As I was kneeling over him, transferring air from my own suit, the Geiger Hill crews broke through on top of us. I paid little attention to the rejoicing. We worked on Hank for fifteen minutes before I saw that it was no use. It had been much too late when we'd made it through to him. He'd used up his remaining air quickly in the exertion of digging.

We were luckier when it came to Geiger Hill. Jess high-balled it the rest of the way. But there was no elation in my heart. I was wondering what to tell Polly.

The wireroads criss-cross each other today all over the surface of old Lunar, but the most spectacular run of them all is still the trip over the mountain division into Geiger Hill. But as the trains come singing along the wire out of Big Bend Tunnel, very few people even notice the marker that has been placed there. It's the way Hank would have wanted it.

But in the cinderpit discussions among lunar wireroaders, you still hear the story of Hank Jones, the bravest wireroader who ever lived. It is told partly because of his selflessness and partly as a warning that you are allowed only one mistake.

Among the contributors in next month's thrilling issue will be

ISAAC ASIMOV,
with "First Law"

ROBERT BLOCH,
with "A Way of Life"

ARTHUR C. CLARKE,
with "The Pacifist"

RAYMOND F. JONES,
with "A Matter of Culture"

"Universe in Books" will be resumed in the same issue.

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the celebrated no-hit inning

by . . . Frederik Pohl

Boley could have been one of baseball's immortals — a truly legendary figure. Perhaps he was, in a way. But then again—

THIS IS A true story, you have to remember. You have to keep that firmly in mind because, frankly, in some places it may not *sound* like a true story. Besides, it's a true story about baseball players, and maybe the only one there is. So you have to treat it with respect.

You know Boley, no doubt. It's pretty hard not to know Boley, if you know anything at all about The National Game. He's the one, for instance, who raised such a scream when the sportswriters voted him Rookie of the Year.

"I never *was* a rookie," he bellowed into three million television screens at the dinner. He's the one who ripped up his contract when his manager called him, "The hittin'est pitcher I ever see."

Boley wouldn't stand for that. "Four-eighteen against the best pitchers in the league," he yelled, as the pieces of the contract went out the window. "Fogarty, I am the hittin'est *hitter* you ever see!"

And he was, too . . .

He's the one they all said reminded them so much of Dizzy Dean at first. But did Diz win thirty-one games in his first year? Boley did; he'll tell you so him-

Frederik Pohl's ALTERNATING CURRENTS *(Ballantine Books) adds immeasurably to his stature as one of science fantasy's most popular and discriminating writers. His new, remarkable yarn chalks up a homer, so to speak. At any rate, here is a World Series, baseball fantasy as exciting as a ninth inning rally.*

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self. But politely, and without bellowing . . .

Somebody explained to Boley that even a truly great Hall-of-Fame pitcher really ought to show up for spring training. So, in his second year, he did. But he wasn't convinced that he *needed* the training, so he didn't bother much about appearing on the field.

Manager Fogarty did some extensive swearing about that, but he did all of his swearing to his pitching coaches and not to Mr. Boleslaw. There had been six ripped-up contracts already that year, when Boley's feelings got hurt about something. So naturally the front office were very insistent that there shouldn't be any more.

There wasn't much the poor pitching coaches could do, of course. They tried pleading with Boley. All he did was grin and ruffle their hair and say, "Don't get all in an uproar." He could ruffle their hair pretty easily, because he stood six inches taller than the tallest of them.

"Boley," said Pitching Coach Magill to him desperately, "you are going to get me into trouble with the manager. I need this job. We just had another little boy at our house, and babies cost money to feed. Won't you please do me a favor and come down to the field, just for a little while?"

Boley had a kind of a soft heart. "Why, if that will make so much difference to you, Coach, I'll do it. But I don't feel much like pitching. We have got twelve exhibition games lined up with the Orioles on the way north, and if I pitch six of those that ought to be all the warm-up I need."

"Three innings?" Magill haggled. "You know I wouldn't ask you if it wasn't important. The thing is, the owner's uncle is watching today."

Boley pursed his lips. He shrugged. "One inning."

"Bless you, Boley!" cried the coach. "One inning it is!"

Andy Andalusia was catching for the regulars when Boley turned up on the field. He turned white as a sheet. "Not the fast ball, Boley! Please, Boley," he begged. "I only been catching a week and I have not hardened up yet."

Boleslaw turned the rosin bag around in his hands and looked around the field. There was action going on at all six diamonds, but the spectators, including the owner's uncle, were watching the regulars.

"I tell you what I'll do," said Boley thoughtfully. "Let's see. For the first man, I pitch only curves. For the second man, the screwball. And for the third man—let's see. Yes. For the third man, I pitch the sinker."

"Fine!" cried the catcher gratefully, and trotted back to home plate.

"He's a very spirited player," the owner's uncle commented to Manager Fogarty.

"That he is," said Fogarty, re-

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membering how the pieces of the fifth contract had felt as they hit him on the side of the head.

"He must be a morale problem for you, though. Doesn't he upset the discipline of the rest of the team?"

Fogarty looked at him, but he only said: "He won thirty-one games for us last year. If he had *lost* thirty-one he would have upset us a lot more."

The owner's uncle nodded, but there was a look in his eye all the same. He watched without saying anything more, while Boley struck out the first man with three sizzling curves, right on schedule. Then he turned around and yelled something at the outfield.

"That crazy—by heaven," shouted the manager, "he's chasing them back into the dugout. I *told* that—"

The owner's uncle clutched at Manager Fogarty just as he was getting up to head for the field. "Wait a minute. What's Boleslaw doing?"

"Don't you see? He's chasing the outfield off the field. He wants to face the next two men without any outfield! That's Satchell Paige's old trick—only he never did it except in exhibitions. But that Boley—"

"This is only an exhibition, isn't it?" remarked the owner's uncle mildly.

Fogarty looked longingly at the field. Then he looked back at the owner's uncle, and shrugged.

"All right." He sat down, remembering that it was the owner's uncle whose sprawling factories had made the family money that bought the owner his team. "Go ahead!" he bawled at the right fielder, who was hesitating halfway to the dugout.

Boley nodded from the mound. When the outfielders were all out of the way he set himself and went into his windup. Boleslaw's windup was a beautiful thing to all who chanced to behold it—unless they happened to be rooting for another team. The pitch was more beautiful still.

"I got it, I got it!" Andalusia cried from behind the plate, waving the ball in his mitt. He returned it to the pitcher triumphantly, as though he could hardly believe he had caught the Boleslaw screwball—after only the first week of spring training.

He caught the second pitch, too. But the third was unpredictably low and outside. Andalusia dived for it in vain.

"Ball one!" cried the umpire. The catcher scrambled up, ready to argue.

"He is right," Boley called graciously from the mound. "I am sorry, but my foot slipped. It was a ball."

"Thank you," said the umpire.

The next screwball was a strike, though, and so were the three sinkers to the third man—though one of the sinkers caught a little piece of the bat and turned into an into-the-dirt foul.

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Boley came off the field to a spattering of applause. He stopped under the stands, on the lip of the dugout. "I guess I am a little rusty at that, Fogarty," he called. "Don't let me forget to pitch another inning or two before we play Baltimore next month."

"I won't!" snapped Fogarty. He would have said more, but the owner's uncle was talking.

"I don't know much about baseball, but that strikes me as an impressive performance. My congratulations."

"You are right," Boley admitted. "Excuse me while I shower, and then we can resume this discussion some more. I think you are a better judge of baseball than you say."

The owner's uncle chuckled, watching him go into the dugout. "You can laugh," said Fogarty bitterly. "You don't have to put up with that for a hundred fifty-four games, and spring training, *and* the World Series."

"You're pretty confident about making the Series?"

Fogarty said simply: "Last year Boley won thirty-one games."

The owner's uncle nodded, and shifted position uncomfortably. He was sitting with one leg stretched over a large, black metal suitcase, fastened with a complicated lock.

"Should I have one of the boys put that in the locker room for you?" Fogarty asked.

"Certainly not!" said the owner's uncle. "I want it right here where I can touch it." He looked around him. "The fact of the matter is," he went on in a lower tone, "this goes up to Washington with me tomorrow. I can't discuss what's in it. But as we're among friends, I can mention that where it's going is the Pentagon."

"Oh," said Fogarty respectfully. "Something new from the factories."

"Something very new," the owner's uncle agreed, and he winked. "And I'd better get back to the hotel with it. But there's one thing, Mr. Fogarty. I don't have much time for baseball. But it's a family affair, after all, and whenever I can help— I mean, it just occurs to me that possibly, with the help of what's in this suitcase— That is, would you like me to see if I could help out?"

"Help out how?" asked Fogarty suspiciously.

"Well— I really mustn't discuss what's in the suitcase. But would it hurt Boleslaw, for example, to be a little more—well, modest?"

The manager exploded, "*No.*"

The owner's uncle nodded. "That's what I've thought. Well, I must go. Will you ask Mr. Boleslaw to give me a ring at the hotel so we can have dinner together, if it's convenient for him?"

It was convenient, all right. Boley had always wanted to see how the other half lived; and they had a fine dinner, served right in the suite, with five waiters in attendance and four kinds of wine. Boley kept pushing the little glasses

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of wine away. But after all the owner's uncle was the owner's uncle, and if *he* thought it was all right— It must have been pretty strong wine, because Boley began to have trouble following the conversation. The four kinds of wine may have helped. . .

It was all right as long as it stuck to earned run averages and batting percentages, but then it got hard to follow—like a long, twisting grounder on a dry September field. Boley wasn't going to admit that, though.

"Sure," he said, trying to follow. And, "You say the *fourth* dimension?" and, "You mean a time machine, like?" It was easy to see he was pretty confused.

The owner's uncle smiled and filled the wine glasses again.

Somehow the black suitcase had been unlocked, in a slow, difficult way. Things made out of crystal and steel were sticking out of it.

"Forget about the time machine," said the owner's uncle patiently. "*It's a military secret, anyhow.* I'll thank you to forget the very words, because heaven knows what the General would think if he found out. Anyway, forget it. What about you, Boley? Do you still say you can hit any pitcher who ever lived, and strike out any batter?"

"Anywhere," agreed Boley, leaning back in the deep cushions and watching the room go around and around. "Any time. I'll bat their ears off."

"Have another glass of wine, Boley," said the owner's uncle, and he began to take things out of the black suitcase.

BOLEY WOKE up with a pounding in his head like Snider, Mays and Mantle hammering Three-Eye League pitching. He moaned and opened one eye.

Somebody blurry was holding a glass out to him. "Hurry up. Drink this."

Boley shrank back. "I will not. That's what got me into this trouble in the first place."

"Trouble? You're in no trouble. But the game's about to start and you've got a hangover."

Ring a fire bell beside a sleeping Dalmatian; sound the Charge in the ear of a retired cavalry major. Neither will respond more quickly than Boley to the words, "The game's about to start."

He managed to drink some of the fizzy stuff in the glass and it was a miracle. It was like a triple play erasing a ninth-inning threat. The headache was gone. He sat up, and the world did not come to an end. In fact, he felt pretty good.

He was being rushed somewhere by the blurry man. They were going very rapidly, and there were tall, bright buildings outside. They stopped.

"We're at the studio," said the man, helping Boley out of a remarkable sort of car.

"The stadium," Boley corrected automatically. He looked around

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for the lines at the box office but there didn't seem to be any.

"The *studio*. Don't argue all day, will you?"

The man was no longer so blurry. Boley looked at him and blushed. He was only a little man, with a worried look to him, and what he was wearing was a pair of vivid orange Bermuda shorts that showed his knees.

He didn't give Boley much of a chance for talking or thinking. They rushed into a building, all green and white opaque glass, and they were met at a flimsy looking elevator by another little man. This one's shorts were aqua, and he had a bright red cummerbund tied around his waist.

"This is him," said Boley's escort.

The little man in aqua looked Boley up and down. "He's a big one. I hope to goodness we got a uniform to fit him for the Series."

Boley cleared his throat. "Series?"

"And you're in it!" shrilled the little man in orange. "This way to the dressing room."

Well, a dressing room was a dressing room, even if this one did have color television screens all around it and machines that went *wheepety-boom* softly to themselves. Boley began to feel at home.

He blinked when they handed his uniform to him, but he put it on. Back in the Steel & Coal League, he had sometimes worn uniforms that still bore the faded legend *100 Lbs. Best Fortified* Gro-Chick, and whatever an owner gave you to put on was all right with Boley. Still, he thought to himself, *kilts!*

It was the first time in Boley's life that he had ever worn a skirt. But when he was dressed, it didn't look too bad, he thought—especially since all the other players were wearing the same thing. There were at least fifty other players and there is nothing like seeing the same costume on everybody in view to make it seem reasonable and right. Haven't the Paris designers been proving that for years?

He saw a familiar figure come into the dressing room, wearing a uniform like his own. "Why, Coach Magill," said Boley, turning with his hand outstretched. "I did not expect to meet you here."

The newcomer frowned, until somebody whispered in his ear. "Oh," he said, "you're Boleslaw."

"Naturally I'm Boleslaw, and naturally you're my pitching coach, Magill. Why do you look at me that way when I've seen you every day for three weeks?"

The man shook his head. "You are thinking of Grand-Daddy Jim," he said, and moved on.

Boley stared after him. Grand-Daddy Jim? But Coach Magill was no grand-daddy, that was for sure. Why, his eldest was no more than six years old. Boley put his hand against the wall to steady himself. It touched something metal and cold. He glanced at it.

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It was a bronze plaque, floor-to-ceiling high, and it was embossed at the top with the words *World Series Honor Roll.* And it listed every team that had ever won the World Series, from the day Chicago won the first Series of all in 1906 until—until—

Boley said something out loud, and quickly looked around to see if anybody had heard him. It wasn't something he wanted people to hear. But it was the right time for a man to say something like that, because what that crazy lump of bronze said, down toward the bottom, with only empty spaces below, was that the most recent team to win the World Series was the Greater New York Dodgers, and the year they won it in was—1998.

1998!

A time machine, thought Boley wonderingly. I guess what he meant was a machine that traveled in *time.*

Now, if you had been picked up in a time machine that leaped through the years like a jet plane leaps through space you might be quite astonished, perhaps, and for a while you might not be good for much of anything, until things calmed down.

But Boley was born calm. He lived by his arm and his eye, and there was nothing to worry about there. Pay him his Class C league contract bonus, and he turns up in Western Pennsylvania, all ready to set a league record for no-hitters his first year. Call him up from the minors and he bats .418 against the best pitchers in baseball. Set him down in the year 1999 and tell him he's going to play in the Series, and he hefts the ball once or twice and says: "I better take a couple of warm-up pitches. Is the spitter allowed?"

They led him to the bullpen. And then there was the playing of the National Anthem and the teams took the field. And Boley got the biggest shock so far.

"Magill," he bellowed in a terrible voice, "what is that other pitcher doing out on the mound?"

The manager looked startled. "That's our starter, Padgett. He always starts with the number-two defensive lineup against righthand batters when the outfield shift goes—"

"Magill! I am not any *relief* pitcher. If you pitch Boleslaw, you *start* with Boleslaw."

Magill said soothingly: "It's perfectly all right. There have been some changes, that's all. You can't expect the rules to stay the same for forty or fifty years, can you?"

"I am not a *relief* pitcher. I—"

"Please, please. Won't you sit down?"

Boley sat down, but he was seething. "We'll see about that," he said to the world. "We'll just see."

Things had changed, all right. To begin with, the studio really was a studio and not a stadium. And although it was a very large room it was not the equal of Ebbetts Field, much less the Yankee Stadium. There seemed to

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be an awful lot of bunting, and the ground rules confused Boley very much.

Then the dugout happened to be just under what seemed to be a complicated sort of television booth, and Boley could hear the announcer screaming himself hoarse just overhead. That had a familiar sound, but—

"And here," roared the announcer, "comes the all-important nothing-and-one pitch! Fans, what a pitcher's duel *this* is! Delasantos is going into his motion! He's coming down! He's delivered it! And it's *in there* for a count of nothing and two! Fans, what a pitcher that Tiburcio Delasantos *is!* And here comes the all-important nothing-and-two pitch, and—and—yes, and he struck him out! *He struck him out!* He struck him *out!* It's a *no-hitter,* fans! In the all-important second inning, it's a no-hitter for Tiburcio Delasantos!"

Boley swallowed and stared hard at the scoreboard, which seemed to show a score of 14-9, their favor. His teammates were going wild with excitement, and so was the crowd of players, umpires cameramen and announcers watching the game.

He tapped the shoulder of the man next to him. "Excuse me. What's the score?" he asked.

"Dig that Tiburcio!" cried the man. "What a first-string defensive pitcher against left-handers he *is!*"

"The score. Could you tell me what it is?"

"Fourteen to nine. Did you *see* that—"

Boley begged, "Please, didn't somebody just say it was a no-hitter?"

"Why, sure," the man explained. "*The inning.* It's a no-hit *inning.*" And he looked queerly at Boley.

It was all like that, except that some of it was worse. After three innings Boley was staring glassy-eyed into space. He dimly noticed that both teams were trotting off the field and what looked like a whole new corps of players were warming up when Manager Magill stopped in front of him.

"You'll be playing in a minute," Magill said kindly.

"Isn't the game over?" Boley gestured toward the field.

"Over? Of course not. It's the third-inning stretch," Magill told him. "Ten minutes for the lawyers to file their motions and make their appeals. You know." He laughed condescendingly. "They tried to get an injunction against the bases-loaded pitchout. Imagine!"

"Hah-hah," Boley echoed. "Mister Magill, can I go home?"

"Nonsense, boy! Didn't you hear me? You're on as soon as the lawyers come off the field!"

Well, that began to make sense to Boley, and he actually perked up a little. When the minutes had passed and Magill took him by the hand, he began to feel almost cheerful again. He picked up the rosin bag and flexed his fingers.

"Boley's ready," he said simply.

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Because nothing confused Boley when he had a ball or a bat in his hand. Set him down any time, anywhere, and he'd hit any pitcher or strike out any batter. He knew exactly what it was going to be like, once he got on the playing field.

Only it wasn't like that at all.

Boley's team was at bat, and the first man up got on with a bunt single. Anyway, they *said* it was a bunt single. To Boley it had seemed as though the enemy pitcher had charged beautifully off the mound, fielded the ball with machinelike precision and flipped it to the first-base player with inches and inches to spare for the out.

But the umpires declared interference by a vote of eighteen to seven, the two left-field umpires and the one with the fieldglasses over the batter's head abstaining. It seemed that the first baseman had neglected to say, "Excuse me" to the runner.

Well, the rules were the rules. Boley tightened his grip on his bat and tried to get a lead on the pitcher's style.

That was hard, because the pitcher was fast. Boley admitted it to himself uneasily. He was *very* fast. He was a big monster of a player, nearly seven feet tall and with something queer and sparkly about his eyes; and when he came down with a pitch there was a sort of a hiss and a *splat,* and the ball was in the catcher's hands. It might, Boley confessed, be a little hard to hit that particular pitcher, because he hadn't yet seen the ball in transit.

Manager Magill came up behind him in the on-deck spot and fastened something to his collar. "Your intercom," he explained. "So we can tell you what to do when you're up."

"Sure, sure." Boley was only watching the pitcher. He looked sickly out there. His skin was a grayish sort of color, and those eyes didn't look right. But there wasn't anything sickly about the way he delivered the next pitch—a sweeping curve that sizzled in and spun away.

The batter didn't look so good either—same sickly gray skin, same giant frame. But he reached out across the plate and caught that curve and dropped it between third-base and short; and both men were safe.

"You're on," said a tinny little voice in Boley's ear. It was the little intercom, and the manager was talking to him over the radio. Boley walked numbly to the plate. Sixty feet away, the pitcher looked taller than ever.

Boley took a deep breath and looked about him. The crowd was roaring ferociously, which was normal enough—except there wasn't any crowd. Counting everybody, players and officials and all, there weren't more than three or four hundred people in sight in the whole studio. But he could *hear* the screams and yells of easily fifty or sixty thousand—

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There was a man, he saw, behind a plate-glass window who was doing things with what might have been records, and the yells of the crowd all seemed to come from loudspeakers under his window. Boley winced and concentrated on the pitcher.

"I will pin his ears back," he said feebly, more to reassure himself than because he believed it.

The little intercom on his shoulder cried in a tiny voice: "You will not, Boleslaw! Your orders are to take the first pitch!"

"But, listen—"

"Take it! You hear me, Boleslaw?"

There was a time when Boley would have swung just to prove who was boss; but the time was not then. He stood there while the big gray pitcher looked him over with those sparkling eyes. He stood there through the windup. And then the arm came down, and he didn't stand there. That ball wasn't invisible, not coming right at him. It looked as big and as fast as the Wabash Cannonball and Boley couldn't help it. For the first time in his life he jumped a yard away, screeching.

"Hit batter! Hit batter!" cried the intercom. "Take your base, Boleslaw."

Boley blinked. Six of the umpires were beckoning him on, so the intercom was right. But still and all— Boley had his pride. He said to the little button on his collar: "I am sorry, but I wasn't hit. He missed me a mile, easy. I got scared is all."

"Take your base, you silly fool!" roared the intercom. "He *scared* you, didn't he? That's just as bad as hitting you, according to the rules! Why, there is no telling what incalculable damage has been done to your nervous system by this fright. So kindly get the bejeepers over to first base, Boleslaw, as provided in the rules of the game!"

He got, but he didn't stay there long, because there was a pinch runner waiting for him. He barely noticed that it was another of the gray-skinned giants before he headed for the locker room and the showers. He didn't even remember getting out of his uniform. He only remembered that he, Boley, had just been through the worst experience of his life.

He was sitting on a bench, with his head on his hands, when the owner's uncle came in, looking queerly out of place in his neat pinstriped suit. The owner's uncle had to speak to him twice before his eyes focused.

"They didn't let me pitch," Boley said wonderingly. "They didn't want Boley to pitch."

The owner's uncle patted his shoulder. "You were a guest star, Boley. One of the all-time greats of the game. Next game they're going to have Christy Mathewson. Doesn't that make you feel proud?"

"They didn't let me pitch," said Boley.

The owner's uncle sat down be-

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side him. "Don't you see? You'd be out of place in this kind of a game. You got on base for them, didn't you? I heard the announcer say it myself. He said you filled the bases in the all-important fourth inning. Two hundred million people were watching this game on television! And they saw you get on base!"

"They didn't let me hit either," Boley said.

There was a commotion at the door and the team came trotting in screaming victory. "We win it, we win it!" cried Manager Magill. "Eighty-seven to eighty-three! What a squeaker!"

Boley lifted his head to croak, "That's fine." But nobody was listening.

The manager jumped on a table and yelled, over the noise in the locker room: "Boys, we pulled a close one out, and you know what that means. We're leading in the Series, eleven games to nine! Now let's just wrap those other two up, and—"

He was interrupted by a blood-curdling scream from Boley. Boley was standing up, pointing with an expression of horror. The athletes had scattered and the trainers were working them over. Only—some of the trainers were using pliers and screwdrivers instead of towels and liniment. Next to Boley, the big gray-skinned pinch runner was flat on his back, and the trainer was lifting one leg away from the body—

"Murder!" bellowed Boley. "That fellow is murdering that fellow!"

The manager jumped down next to him. "Murder? There isn't any murder, Boleslaw! What are you talking about?"

Boley pointed mutely. The trainer stood gaping at him, with the leg hanging limp in his grip. It was completely removed from the torso it belonged to, but the torso seemed to be making no objections. The curious eyes were open but no longer sparkling; the gray skin, at closer hand, seemed metallic and cold.

The manager said fretfully, "I swear, Boleslaw, you're a nuisance. They're just getting cleaned and oiled, batteries recharged, that sort of thing. So they'll be in shape tomorrow, you understand."

"Cleaned," whispered Boley. *"Oiled."* He stared around the room. All of the gray-skinned ones were being somehow disassembled; bits of metal and glass were sticking out of them. "Are you trying to tell me," he croaked, "that those fellows aren't fellows?"

"They're ballplayers," said Manager Magill impatiently. "Robots. Haven't you ever seen a robot before? We're allowed to field six robots on a nine-man team. It's perfectly legal. Why, next year I'm hoping the Commissioner'll let us play a whole robot team. *Then* you'll see some baseball!"

With bulging eyes Boley saw it was true. Except for a handful of

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flesh-and-blood players like himself, the team was made up of man-shaped machines, steel for bones, electricity for blood, steel and plastic and copper cogs for muscle.

"Machines," said Boley, and turned up his eyes.

The owner's uncle tapped him on the shoulder worriedly. "It's time to go back," he said.

So Boley went back.

He didn't remember much about it, except that the owner's uncle had made him promise never, never to tell anyone about it, because it was orders from the Defense Department, and you never could tell how useful a time machine might be in a war. But he did get back, and he woke up the next morning with all the signs of a hangover, and the sheets kicked to shreds around his feet.

He was still bleary when he staggered down to the coffee shop for breakfast. Magill, the pitching coach, who had no idea that he was going to be grand-daddy to Magill the series-winning manager, came solicitiously over to him.

"Bad night, Boley? You look like you have had a bad night."

"Bad?" repeated Boley. "Bad? Magill, you have got no idea. The owner's uncle said he would show me something that would learn me a little humility and, Magill, he came through. Yes, he did. Why, I saw a big bronze tablet with the names of the Series winners on it, and I saw—"

And he closed his mouth right there, because he remembered right there what the owner's uncle had said about closing his mouth. He shook his head and shuddered. "Bad," he said. "You bet it was bad."

Magill coughed. "Gosh, that's too bad, Boley. I guess—I mean, then maybe you wouldn't feel like pitching another couple of innings—well, anyway one inning—today, because—"

Boley held up his hand. "Say no more, please. You want me to pitch today, Magill?"

"That's about the size of it," the coach confessed.

"I will pitch today," said Boley. "If that is what you want me to do, I will do it. I am now a reformed character. I will pitch tomorrow too, if you want me to pitch tomorrow, and any other day you want me to pitch. And if you do not want me to pitch, I will sit on the sidelines. Whatever you want is perfectly all right with me, Magill, because, Magill, I—hey! Hey, Magill, what are you doing down there on the floor?"

So that is why Boley doesn't give anybody any trouble any more, and if you tell him now that he reminds you of Dizzy Dean, why he'll probably shake your hand and thank you for the compliment—even if you're a sportswriter, even. Oh, there still are a few special little things about him, of course—not even counting the things like how many shut-outs he pitched last year (eleven) or how many home

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runs he hit (fourteen). But everybody finds him easy to get along with.

They used to talk about the change that had come over him a lot and wonder what caused it. Some people said he got religion and others said he had an incurable disease and was trying to do good in his last few weeks on earth. But Boley never said. He only smiled; and the owner's uncle was too busy in Washington to be with the team much after that.

So now they talk about other things when Boley's name comes up. For instance, there's his little business about the pitching machine. When he shows up for batting practice—which is every morning, these days—he insists on hitting against real live pitchers instead of the machine. It's even in his contract, in large bold type. Boley takes no chances.

And then, every March he bets nickels against anybody around the training camp that'll bet with him that he can pick that year's Series winner. He doesn't bet more than that, because the Commissioner naturally doesn't like big bets from ballplayers.

But, even for nickels, don't bet against him, because he isn't ever going to lose, not before 1999.

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collector's item

by . . . Robert F. Young

Very trivial things can go into the weaving of a nest. The human race, for instance—

THE CONDENSATION of the histories of ten thousand races into a text concise enough to fit into a single volume had been a task of unprecedented proportions. There had been times when the Galactic Historian had doubted whether even his renowned abilities were up to the assignment that the Galactic Board of Education had so lightly tossed his way, times when he had thrown up his hands—all five of them—in despair. But at last the completed manuscript lay before him on his desk with nothing but the final reading remaining between it and publication.

The Galactic Historian repeatedly wiped his brows as he turned the pages. It was a warm night, even for Mixxx Seven. Now and then, a tired breeze struggled down from the hills and limped across the lowlands to the Galactic University buildings. It crept into the Galactic Historian's study via the open door and out again via the open windows, fingering the manuscript each time it passed but doing nothing whatsoever about the temperature.

The manuscript was something

We've often wondered what would happen if Robert Young should cease to be a lyrically intense writer for a story or two, forsaking the bright, poetic worlds of MISS KATY THREE *and* THE FIRST SWEET SLEEP OF NIGHT *to become dispassionately analytical on a cosmic scale. Now we know! He'd chill us to the bone by setting two squixes to brooding over a never-to-be born Earth, exactly as he has done here. And thrill us, too—with the liveliest kind of entertainment.*

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more than a hammered-down history of galactic achievement. It was the ultimate document. The two and seventy thousand jarring texts that it summarized had been systematically destroyed, one by one, after the Galactic Historian had stripped them of their objective information. If an historical event was not included in the manuscript, it failed as an event. It ceased to have reality.

The responsibility was the Galactic Historian's alone and he did not take it lightly. But he had a lot on his minds and, of late, he hadn't been sleeping well. He was overworked and over-tired and overanxious. He hadn't seen his wives for two Mixxx months and he was worried about them—all fifty of them.

He never should have let them take the Hub cruise in the first place. But they'd been so enthusiastic and so eager that he simply hadn't had the hearts to let them down. Now, despite his better judgments, he was beginning to wonder if they might not be on the make for another coordinator.

Wives trouble, on top of all his chronological trouble, was too much. The Galactic Historian could hardly be blamed for wanting to see the last of the manuscript, for wanting to transmit it to his publishers, potential hiatuses and all, and take the next warp for the Hub.

But he was an historian—*the* historian, in fact—and he persisted heroically in his task, rereading stale paragraphs and checking dreary dates, going over battles and conquests and invasions and interregnums. Despite his mood and despite the heat, the manuscript probably would have arrived at his publishers chronologically complete. So complete, in fact, that schoolteachers all over the galaxy would have gotten the textbook they had always wanted—a concise chronicle of everything that had ever happened since the explosion of the primeval atom, a history textbook that no other history textbook could contradict for the simple reason that there were no other history textbooks.

As it was, they got the textbook, but it did not contain everything that had ever happened. Not quite.

Two factors were responsible for the omission. The first was an oversight on the part of the Galactic Historian. With so much on his minds, he had forgotten to number the pages of the manuscript.

The second factor was the breeze.

The breeze was the ultimate archfiend and there can be no question as to its motivation. Nothing short of sheer malice could have caused it suddenly to remember its function after neglecting that function all evening.

All evening it had been tiptoeing down the hillsides and across the lowlands as though it was afraid of disturbing a single blade of grass or a single drooping leaf. And then, at the crucial moment, it

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huffed and puffed itself up into a little hurricane, charged down upon the Galactic University buildings and whooshed through the Galactic Historian's study like a band of interstellar dervishes.

Unfortunately, the Galactic Historian had begun to wipe his brows at the very moment of the breeze's entry. While the act was not a complicated one, it did consume time and monopolize attention. It is not surprising, therefore, that he failed to witness the theft. Neither is it surprising that he failed to notice afterwards that the page he had been checking was gone.

He was, as previously stated, overworked, over-tired, and over-anxious and, in such a state, even a Galactic Historian can skip a whole series of words and dates and never know the difference. A hiatus of twenty thousand years is hardly noticeable anyway. Galactically speaking, twenty thousand years is a mere wink in time.

The breeze didn't carry the page very far. It simply whisked it through a convenient window, deposited it beneath a xixxix tree and then returned to the hills to rest. But the choice of a xixxix tree is highly significant and substantiates the malicious nature of the breeze's act. If it had chosen a muu or a buxx tree instead, the Galactic Historian might have found the page in the morning when he took his constitutional through the university grounds.

However, since a xixxix tree was selected, no doubt whatever can remain as to the breeze's basic motivation. Articles of a valuable nature just aren't left beneath xixxix trees. Everybody knows that squixes live in xixxix trees and everybody knows that squixes are collectors. They collect all sorts of things, buttons and pins and twigs and pebbles—anything at all, in fact, that isn't too big for them to pick up and carry into their xixxix tree houses.

They have been called less kind things than collectors. Thieves, for example, and scavengers. But collectors are what they really are. Collecting fulfills a basic need in their mammalian makeup; the possession of articles gives them a feeling of security. They love to surround their little furry bodies with all sorts of odds and ends, and their little arboreal houses are stuffed with everything you can think of.

And they simply adore paper. They adore it because it has a practical as well as a cultural value.

Specifically, they adore it because it is wonderful to make hammocks out of.

When the two squixes in the xixxix tree saw the page drift to the ground, they could hardly believe their eyes. They chittered excitedly as they skittered down the trunk. The page had hardly stopped fluttering before it was whisked aloft again, clenched in tiny squix fingers.

The squixes wasted no time. It

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had been a long while since the most cherished of all collector's items had come their way and they needed a new hammock badly. First, they tore the page into strips, then they began to weave the strips together.

—1456, Gut. Bi. pr.; 1492, Am. dis.; 1945, at. b. ex. Almgdo.; 1971, mn. rchd., they wove.

—2004, Sir. rchd.; 2005-6, Sir. —E. wr.; 2042, Btlgs. rchd.; 2043-4, Btlgs.—E. wr.

They wove and wove and wove.

15,000, E. Emp. clpsd.; 15,038, E. dstryd.; Hist. E., end of.

It was a fine hammock, the best the two squixes had ever wove. But they didn't sleep well that night. They twisted and turned and tossed, and they dreamed the most fantastic dreams—

Which isn't particularly surprising, considering what they were sleeping on. Sleeping on the history of Earth would be enough to give anybody nightmares.

Even squixes.

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political application

by . . . John Victor Peterson

If matter transference really works — neanderthalers can pop up anywhere. And that's very hard on politicians!

SOME SAY scientists should keep their noses out of politics. Benson says it's to prevent damage to their olfactory senses. Benson's a physicist.

I've known Allan Benson for a long time. In fact I've bodyguarded him for years and think I understand him better than he does himself. And when he shook security at White Sands, my boss didn't hesitate to tell me that knowing Benson as I do I certainly shouldn't have let him skip off. Or crisp words to that effect.

The pressure was on. Benson was seeking a new fuel—or a way of compressing a known fuel—to carry a torchship to Mars. His loss could mean a delay of decades. We knew he'd been close, but not *how* close.

My nickname's Monk. I've fought it, certainly, but what can you do when a well-wishing mother names you after a wealthy uncle and your birth certificate says Neander Thalberg? As early as high school some bright pundit noted the name's similarity to that of a certain prehistoric man. Unfortunately the similarity is not in

John Victor Peterson lives in Jackson Heights, almost a stone's throw from La Guardia Airfield. But he doesn't just stand and watch the big planes roar past overhead. He has the kind of brilliant technical know-how which makes what goes on inside of a plane of paramount interest to him. He's interested, too, in the future superduper gadgetry, as this hilarious yarn attests.

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name alone: I'm muscular, stooped, and, I must admit, not handsome hero model material.

Well, maybe the nickname's justified, but still, Al Benson didn't have to give the crowning insult. And yet, if he hadn't, there probably wouldn't be a torchship sterning on Mars just about now.

C. I. (Central Intelligence, that is) at the Sands figured Benson would head for New York. Which is why the boss sent me here. I registered in a hotel in the 50's and, figuring that whatever Benson intended to do would have spectacular results, I kept the stereo on News.

Benson's wife hadn't yielded much info. Sure she described the clothes he was wearing and said he'd taken nothing else except an artist's case. What was in that was anybody's guess; his private lab is such a jumble nobody could tell what, if anything, was missing.

C. I. knew his political feelings. Seems he'd been talking wild about the upcoming presidential election and had sworn he'd nip the draft-Cadigan movement in the bud. Cadigan's Mayor of New York City. He's anti-space. In fact, Cadigan's anti just about everything in science except intercontinental missiles. Strictly for defense, of course. Cadigan says.

A weathercaster was making rash promises on the stereo when the potray dinged. The potray? I certainly wasn't expecting mail. Only C. I. knew where I was and they'd have closed-circuited me on visio if they wanted contact.

The potray dinged and there was a package in it.

Now matter transference I knew. It put mailmen out of business. There's a potray in every domicile and you can put things in it, dial the destination and they come out there. They come out the same size and weight and in the same condition as they went in, provided they didn't go in alive. Life loses, as many a shade of a hopeful guinea pig could relate.

So the potray dinged and here was this package. At first glance it looked like one of those cereal samples manufacturers have been everlastingly sending through since postal rates dropped after cost of the potrays had been amortized. But cereal samples don't come through at midday; they're night traffic stuff.

The package was light, its wrapping curiously smooth. There was an envelope attached with my correct name and potray number. Whoever had mailed it must be in C. I. or must know someone in C. I. who knew where I was.

The postmark was blurred but I could make out that it had been cast from Grand Central. Time didn't matter. It couldn't have been cast more than a microsecond earlier.

The envelope contained a card upon which was typed:

"Caution! Site on cylinder of 2

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ft. radius and 6 ft. height. Unwrap at armslength."

Now what? A practical joke? If so, it must be Benson's work. He's played plenty, from pumping hydrogen sulphide (that's rotten egg gas, as you know) into the air-conditioning system at high school to calling a gynecologist to the launching stage at the Sands to sever an umbilical cord which he neglected to say was on a Viking rocket.

I followed the instructions. As I bent back the first fold of the strange wrapping it came alive, unfolding itself with incredible swiftness.

Something burst forth like a freed djinn—almost instantaneously lengthening, spreading—a thing with beetling brows, low, broad forehead, prognathous jaw, and a hunched, brutally muscular body, with a great club over its swollen shoulder.

I went precipitously backward over a coffee table.

It stabilized, a dead mockery, replica of a Neanderthal.

A placard hung on its chest. I read this:

"Even some of the early huntsmen weren't successful. Abandon the chase, Monk. I've things to do and this—your blood brother, no doubt—couldn't catch me any more than you can!"

Which positively infuriated me. Do you blame me?

A few cussing, cussed minutes later I realized what Al Benson had apparently done: solved the torchship's fuel problem.

Oh, I'd seen Klein bottles and Mobius strips and other things that twist in on themselves and into other dimensions, twisting into microcosms and macrocosms—into elsewhere, in any event. And here I had visual evidence that Benson had had something nearly six feet tall and certainly two feet in breadth enclosed in a nearly weightless carton less than eight inches on the side!

Sufficient fuel for a Marstrip? Just wrap it up!

The stereo's audio was saying: ". . . from the Museum of Natural History. Curators are compiling a list of the missing exhibits which we will reveal to you on this channel as soon as it's available. Now we switch to Dick Joy at City Hall with news of the latest exhibit found. Come in, Dick!"

On the steps of City Hall was a full size replica of a mastodon over whose massive back was draped a banner bearing the slogan: "The Universal Party is for you! Don't return to prehistory with Cadigan! Re-elect President Ollie James and go to the stars!"

And there was a closeup of Mayor Cadigan standing pompous and wrathful—and looking very diminutive—behind the emblem of his opposition party.

Dick Joy was saying, "Eyewitnesses claim that this replica—obviously one of the items stolen from the Museum of Natural His-

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tory—suddenly materialized here. Immediately prior to the alleged materialization a man—whose photograph we show now—ostensibly bent down to tie a shoelace, setting a shoebox beside him. He left the box, walking off into the gathering crowd, and this mastodon *seemed* to spring into being where the shoebox had been.

"The mastodon replica has been examined. A report just handed me says it is definitely that from the Museum and that it could not conceivably have been contained in a shoebox. It's obviously a case of mass hypnotism. The replica must have been trucked here. There's no other possible explanation. Excuse me!"

Dick Joy turned away, then back.

"I have just been handed a notice that Mayor Cadigan wishes to say a few words and I hereby introduce him, His Honor the Mayor, Joseph F. Cadigan!"

His balding, fragmentarily curly-haired Honor glared.

"Friends," he said chokingly, "whatever madman is responsible for this outrageous act will not go unpunished. I call upon the City's Finest to track him down and bring him to justice.

"I am for justice, for equality and peace. I—"

His Honor was apparently determined to use all the time he could. Being a newscast, it was for free.

I killed the stereo. And the visio rang. It was Phil Pollini, the C. I. Chief.

"Monk," he said, "guess you've seen the stereo. Al's out to fix the Mayor's wagon."

"Say that again," I said, having a brainstorm.

"Now, look—" he started.

"Maybe you've got something there, Chief," I cut in. "Cadigan's got the superduper of all wagons—a seven passenger luxury limousine with bulletproof glass, stereo, a bar, venetian blinds and heaven knows what else. Hot and cold running androids, maybe. He prowls the elevated highways with an 'In Conference' sign flashing over the windshield. So's he can't be wiretapped or miked, I guess. It'd be a natch for Al Benson to go for."

Pollini grinned.

"So if you were Benson what'd you do to fix the Mayor's wagon?"

"Hitch it to a star," I said, "and the closest spot to a star would be the observation platform of the Greater Empire State."

"You're probably right," the Chief said. "Get going!"

I got.

Ten minutes later I walked out onto the observation platform on the 150th floor of the Greater Empire State Building—and found an incredulous crowd gathered around the mayor's limousine. I felt good. I'd predicted.

I asked a guard, "How'd it get here?"

His eyebrows were threatening a back somersault.

"Don't know," he said. "I was looking over the side; then turned

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around and here it was! You have any ideas?"

Which is when I spotted Al Benson.

I settled for shoving Benson toward the elevator, being careful since he had a box under each arm. We made the elevator and went down and it stopped on the 120th floor and the operator said, "Change here for all lower floors and the street—"

As we waited on the 120th for the down elevator, the P. A. system barked:

"Attention all building occupants. By order of the Mayor no one will be permitted to leave the building until further notice. Please remain where you are. We will try not to inconvenience you for any great time."

There was no one close to us.

"Al," I said, "look, stinker, you've had your fun but this is it. I don't know what you've got in those boxes but you've got to turn them over—and yourself—to the next copper who shows. This is a civil matter, strictly local, and not C. I."

Benson grinned. "Got to make a delivery first, Monk. Look, there's a potray over there. Can I use it?"

His grin was infectious. "So what are you going to send where?" I asked as sternly as I could.

"The Mayor's personal files," he said. "I managed to carry them out of City Hall—once they'd been suitably wrapped, of course! I'm sending them to the Senate Investigation Committee. Don't worry, Monk, His Honor won't be President this or any year!"

I helped him dial the SIC number.

"What about the other package?" I asked him then.

"Insurance," he said. "Come out on the setback."

He placed the last package on the mosaic tile of the terrace, untied its string, flipped open the edge of the Benson wrapping and jumped back.

It was an NYC police helicopter.

We potrayed it back from the Sands. Suitably wrapped, of course.

That was a month ago. Most of it never came out in the papers. Nothing of Benson's invention. C. I. thought it should be squelched, at least until Benson and the boys get back from Mars.

Which would be the end except for the packages. Yes, Benson left a gross of them with me and I've been mailing them one a day to the leaders of the opposition party. I don't truly know what's in them, of course. But it's very curious that the day before the torchship left exactly one hundred and forty-four cylinders of hydrogen sulphide were missing from quartermaster stores. Coincidentally one of my C. I. friends tells me Benson had him rig up a gross of automatic releases for gas cylinders.

Adding it up, it could be a good lesson for politicians to keep their noses out of science.

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satan and the comrades

by . . . Ralph Bennitt

Lucifer wasn't sure that just the right improvements had been made in Hell. So he used a dash of sulfur with Satanic skill.

NICK felt almost good-humoredly buoyant after his year's holiday as a college boy. About a second after leaving Earth he slowed his traveling speed down to the medium velocity of light by shifting from fifth dimension to fourth. Though still a million miles above the wastes of Chaos and twice that distance from the gates of Hell, his X-ray eyes were quick to discern a difference in the road far below him.

Sin and Death had built that broad highway eons before. On leaving Hell, presumedly forever to carry on their work among men, they had done a mighty good job of the original construction. But time had worked its ravages with the primrose-lined path, and it was not surprising that on starting his sabbatical leave, Nick had ordered his chief engineer to repair the road as a first step in his plan to modernize Hell.

Apparently, old Mulciber had done a bang-up job, and Nick roared in laughter at evidences of the engineer's genius and those of

It is not always easy to laugh at Satan, or take pleasure in his antics. But when the Prince of Darkness goes on a vacation or holds a mirror up to human nature at its most Luciferian chuckles are certain to arise and follow one another in hilarious profusion. Here is a yarn contrived by a craftsman with ironic lightning bolts at his fingertips, as mordantly compelling as it is jovial and Jovian. If you liked SATAN ON HOLIDAY, *and were hoping for a sequel you can now rejoice in full measure, for Ralph Bennitt has provided that longed-for delight.*

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wily Belial, the handsome court wag. The Propaganda Chief had added advertising at numerous new roadhouses along the way, and unwary shades traveling hellward gazed at beautiful scenes of lush vegetation instead of a dreary expanse like the Texas Panhandle. This "devilish cantraip sleight" also changed the raw Chaos climate to a steady 72°F and gave off a balmy fragrance of fruits and flowers.

Ten thousand drachmas, a fictitious unit of currency established by foxy old Mammon, was the flat fee for use of the road. Blissfully unaware of this "Transportation Charge," or how it would be paid, numerous phantom pilgrims were sliding down the steeper hills—and having a swell time. Their shouts of glee reached Nick's largish ears despite the lack of air as mortals know it. Clever old Mulcie had installed freezing plants here and there to surface the road with glare ice.

Nick poised above a party of phantom men and girls sliding downhill on their *derrieres* and ending in a heap at the bottom. A nice change from traveling under their own power. Their maximum speed while swift and incomprehensible to mortals, seemed relatively slow to one of Hell's old timers. Only Nick and his best scout, Cletus, could move at thought speed — "Click-Click Transportation."

Drifting on, a pleased smile on his red, bony face, Nick paused several times to read Belial's welcomings.

"Die and see the original Naples in all its natural beauty," said one sign. "Try our hot sulphur springs and become a new soul." Gayest pleasures were promised to all and golfers had special attention. "Register with the pro at your favorite golf club so you can qualify. No charge for pro's services who'll teach you to break 80. Free lunch and drinks at all Nineteenth Holes."

No fool shade would wonder what he'd qualify for, nor suspect he'd have to shovel eighty million tons of coal and ashes before his handicap would be lowered enough to earn him a set of golf clubs or that the free lunch and drinks were chunks of brimstone, the sulphurous air and Styx River water which is always just below boiling point at 3,000°F.

Hell's thousand of new golf courses, gambling joints and bars would be available only after downtrodden souls had worked a millennia or two at common labor jobs. A shady deal, indeed, but all a part of Nick's master plan to get him and his legions back to Heaven.

By modernizing Hades he hoped to annoy "The Big Boss Upstairs" while diverting the attention of those two vigilant celestial watchers, Michael and Raphael, from the main idea. In a series of bold moves, known only to Nick and

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his Board or Inner Council, mankind would be wiped off the earth —and thus bring The BBU to time. Or so Nick hoped.

As a first step, he had spent a year as Pudzy, a college boy, studying electronics and modern skills of all kinds. He had enjoyed the holiday on Earth though it irked him to recall that he'd been obliged to do good here and there. The thought of these satanic lapses caused him to frown, but his jolly mood returned when he saw the familiar gates of Hell wide open in obedience to his whistle.

The whistle's high frequency waves also awakened Cerberus, the three-headed watch dog, besides actuating "The Dingus." This electronic device Nick had stolen to operate the three ponderous triple-fold gates of adamantine, brass and iron.

He slowed to supersonic speed, brought back his great red wings and made a neat three-point landing without injuring the needle-sharp dart at the end of his long, black tail. Still feeling jovial, he kicked all three of Cerberus's heads, then zoomed down through the tunnel to the north bank of the River Styx.

There he halted to view the ten-lane suspension bridge Mulciber had thrown across the steamy black water. Nick was wondering how the old genius had accomplished such a feat when a thick black wall dropped across the bridgehead.

"Cost you five thousand rubles to cross, mister," Charon called in a thick voice.

The old riverman who had ferried new shades across the earth-hell boundary for eons of time, had just returned after a year's vacation in Moscow.

He hid a bottle under his brimstone bench, then straightened a gaudy red tie as he weaved forward. A changed devil, Charon. His year in Redland had done more than put him into a natty summer suit. Although not very bright, he had unusual powers of observation. He liked to ape the odd speech of his customers, especially American prospectors. These truculent but harmless old timers worked at odd jobs around the nearby palace grounds, and in the ferryman they found a kindred spirit.

Nick eyed the loyal old fellow's red tie with amazement. "What, for St. Pete's sake, are you drinking, Char?"

"Vodka," Charon gasped. Recognizing the stern voice, he tried to focus his bleary eyes. "'Scuse it, Your Majesty. I've come a long way and alone. Your substitute, Pudzy, gimme a bottle 'fore he returned to Ameriky, and it's durn cold up there in Musk-Cow, and so I took a few nips, and I felt so goldurned glad to git back I polished off what was left, so I didn't recognize Your Majesty when you came zoomin' along, and if you'll sort of overlook—"

Nick patted the frightened old

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fellow's scrawny shoulder. "Better check in and sleep it off, Char."

"Gosh, stoppin' *you!*"

"You let everybody in till I tell you different. Forget the toll charge too, you old conniver."

"Yeah, and look!" Chortling with glee, Charon tottered back to his station and put one hand across the beam of a photo-electric eye. The ponderous gate slid silently upward. "It weighs fifteen hundred tons, Mulcie says, and I don't even push a button."

"You still smell like a Communist, Char," Nick said, sniffing the good sulphurous air. "How come you're on the job as bridge-keeper if you've just returned from Moscow?"

"Orders from Beelzebub, and it's nigh a half hour by now since this fella came across the bridge. I'm sauntering home, friends with everybody, I am—"

"What fellow?"

Charon scratched his grisly thatch. "Come to think of it, I never see 'im afore this. I'm standing back there, looking down at my old skiff and wondering about my job, when this fella comes up. 'This is for you, Charon,' he says, and held out your official incombusterible letterhead with the crossbones and dripping blood—"

"Yeah, yeah. What does this stranger look like? What's his name? Who signed the paper?"

"Beelzebub signed it. I guess I know the John Henry of your Number Two devil even if I am a dumb ferryman." Perhaps sensing he had blundered, Charon almost wept. "This paper appoints me head bridge-tender from now to the *end* of eternity, and, bein' worried about my job, I hopped right to it. You're the first—"

"Which way did he go? What's he look like?"

Charon almost said "Thataway," as he shook his head and pointed a trembling finger to the distant shore. "Lemme see. He wore neat clothes about like mine, and he zoomed off like the upper crust shades do when in a hurry—which ain't often. He has mean little eyes, sort of pale blue, is built wide and short, and talks American good as I do. Now't I think of it, he had an impederiment in his speech, and he smelt like a bed of sweet peas."

"Very good, indeed." Scanning the paper, Nick smiled as he recognized a forgery of the Beelzebub signature. He drew out his pen which writes under fire as well as water, and scribbled "Nick," then put the document into the eager hands. "This gives you the job forever—or till I revoke the appointment."

"Boydy-dumb-deals!" Charon shouted. "Boss, you oughta hear about my adventures in Redland. I had a real gabfest with the new Premier, Andrei Broncov, and his Minister of Culture, Vichy Volonsky."

Nick grinned sardonically. "I heard a little about the most re-

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cent changes in the Kremlin. Are my old sidekicks well? And are they having any particular trouble since liquidating the old gang?"

"How come you call that fat crumb, Broncov, your sidekick?" Charon frowned, trying to collect his wits in the dread presence. "He didn't ask about you. He took me for an illegitimate son of Joe Stalin's, so how would he know you and I are pals? I bought this red tie and hired a sleeping dictionary to catch onto the language better, and—"

"Your dictionary probably spilled things to the MVD."

"Not while my gold held out. Anyhow, those punks are way overrated. Tricky, maybe, and they lie good. They'd rather bump you off than eat breakfast."

"Purge is the word. The old comrades Broncov threw out a month ago now fully understand its meaning. How is the comrade?"

"Gosh, boss, I'm sick of hearing that word. They say it just before they knife you. Broncov's been busy, all right. Since taking over the Number One job he's been sending a lot of his best friends down this way. To keep Joe Stalin company, he told me. He looks fat even if Bill Shakespeare says this new lot—"

"I suppose he and his pals plied you with liquor," Nick said.

"They tried to drink me under the table." Charon cut a laugh in half. "Gosh, I durn near forgot. Y'know what the sidewinder, Bronco, babbled 'fore he passed out? Top drawer stuff. Only he and this Vichy Volonskyvich know about it. Seems Bronco learned, somehow, about your taking a vacation, so he's been torturing a lot of his friends into confessing they plotted agin 'im. He promised them an easy death if they'd carry on down here. How you like that?"

"The fools. What's his plan?"

"I ain't sure I got it all as his tongue got thicker from the vodka. But I learned Hell's full of comrades who've sworn to their god, Lee-Nine, they'll toss you to the wolves. They aim to pull Joe Stalin off his clinker-picking job and make him secretary here."

"Go on," Nick urged in ominous tones. "How?"

"They've swiped some new secret weapon and figure to obliterate you and every devil in authority so things will be organized nice and cozy when they finally get here. The Dumb—"

"Good report, Char." The new weapon did not bother Nick much, but from his profound studies of atom smashing he decided anything can happen these days even to a top devil. He continued briskly: "Hereafter, sniff all your customers and make sure they don't *smell* like a Red. You know the aroma by now—sweet peas with an underlying stink—so keep your nose peeled. When you spot a comrade, radio-phone the guard. Those lads will know what to do you can bet your last ruble."

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II

THE ROUSING welcome home Nick received as he climbed the hill to his great palace would have warmed his heart if he'd owned one.

"Thanks, boys and girls," he intoned in his best golden voice. "It's swell to be back among you. I haven't time for a speech now, but tune in to Channel Thirteen tomorrow evening for my fireside chat."

He wanted to take off for Moscow immediately, but decided to start the war by calling The Board. Also, the boys would be hurt if he didn't inspect what they'd done during his absence. After a hasty, Russian-style dinner of caviar, cabbage and cold horse with a gold flagon of vodka, he ordered Azazel, Flag Bearer and Statistician Chief, to call a meeting in the throne room.

Little Cletus waylaid his big boss. The scout among the celestials looked like a chubby cherub what with his dimpled cheeks and curly black hair, but he'd proved to be the trickiest imp south of the pearly gates. Knowing that Raphael had cajoled the little imp into revealing something of the improvements in Hades, Nick suspected treachery by one of his most trusted scouts.

"I hear you've been seeing Raphael!" he barked.

"Aw, I told 'im a pack of lies," Cletus scoffed. "Maybe Rafe figured out something; he's a smart apple. I told 'im everybody here is hot and unhappy like you ordered me to say if they ever caught me. I said our air-conditioning system goes haywire and that we were ripping out a thousand old boilers and coolers. Stuff like that."

"Don't lie to me, you ornery little brat. Okay to anybody else but not to me. I happened to hear Rafe talking to Mike, and they're wise to my plan of making Hell attractive."

"Well, hell," Cletus protested, "they saw Mulcie's gangs fixing the road. If Rafe and them extra-extrapopulated that dope to figure out the truth, why blame me?"

"We'll forget it," Nick said, vastly relieved to believe his scout had not betrayed him. "I have a job for you. I'm going to Moscow and I want your help. Light out as soon as you can. Requisition as much gold as you can handle by the usual translation method, and include a sack of polished diamonds and rubies. I'll tell Mammon it's okay when I arrange for my own supply."

"Okay, boss. Where do we meet? And what am I supposed to look like, and do?"

"Make yourself bellhop size and register at the Droshky Hotel as Prince Navi from Baghdad with fifty Persian oil wells to sell. Let 'em see your gold and jewels. And, remember, you'll account for any dough you toss away to women and bribes. Get going!"

Nick could see into the *near*

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future, at least, and he chuckled after Cletus vanished through the wall. "The little devil doesn't know what's in store for him."

In the throne room, sage old Beelzebub sat at the right of His Majesty's chair; huge Moloch with his evil grin and snaggle teeth, at the left. Tall, prissy Azazel, always acting important, planted Satan's flag and then sat down at a table opposite wide-shouldered Mulciber and handsome Belial. Charter-members all of the original organization booted out of Heaven some eighteen million years ago when Nick's first but not last rebellion flopped.

After the customary ritual of renewing their vow to get back to Heaven, the gang sat down. Nick rapped the arm of his throne and glared at Chemos, the lustful one.

"Cheme," he said, "if you will quit flirting with Astarte, The Board will take up business."

Belial snickered when the culprits' red faces grew even redder, and after a wink at the court wit, Nick went on: "I intend to take off for Moscow after a quick look about with Mulcie and Belial. Incidentally, my compliments on the good work you did on the road."

"Egad, boss," Moloch complained, "why can't you stay home more and line things up for us?"

"Time enough—" Nick sniffed, scowled, then pointed toward a thick pillar near the rear of the big room. "I smell an interloper. Thammuz, Dagon, drag 'im up here! Beel, I fancy he's the one who forged your signature."

Beelzebub rose in anger when a shadowy figure darted for the door. The intruder moved as fast as any wraith but the two former gods were too quick for him. A brief struggle, then they dragged the eavesdropper before the throne where they held him upside down.

"It's the Paperhanger!" Beelzebub roared.

"I guessed that from Charon's description," Nick said calmly. "He's siding with the Reds again—Smell him? Stand up, Adolf, and hear your sentence!"

"I didn't do a thing, Your Majesty," Hitler began, but the hot, glowing eyes were too much to face. His knees buckled and he sank, groveling, on the floor. "Didn't I send you millions of customers?" he wailed. "Haven't I done a good job of sweeping out and collecting garbage? Have a heart, Nick. I came in here to sweep, and how would I know about this private conference?"

"You talk about hearts?" Nick flared. "You hung around to listen. You forged Beelzebub's signature on my official paper, then put Charon in charge of the bridge, thinking he's too dumb to report any Commies coming here."

"I can prove—"

"You get the same chance at that which you gave people in Berlin. Down the chute with him, boys!"

The chute, connecting with a main one leading down to the

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burning lake, has a flap which Belial gleefully lifted. Since shades have no mass worth mentioning, the long duct acts like a department store vacuum tube.

"Oh, my beloved emperor, forgive me," Adolf yelled as he felt the suction. "I only wanted to organize a counter-revolution against the Communists and—"

"Ratting on your pals again, eh?" Nick sneered. "You stay in the burning lake a thousand earth years. You'll have plenty of time and company for your plotting. Let 'im rip!"

"No! I'll be forgotten—"

"No one remembers you now except as a dung heap." Nick turned a thumb downward, and the screeching shade vanished.

"Like a paper towel in a gale," Belial said as he let the flap clang shut. "How'd that creep get a job where he could snoop?"

"My fault," Beelzebub admitted. "He's a smooth talker. I saw him not long after you left, Your Majesty, when I went out to inspect the garbage incinerator. He had shaved off his dinky mustache and changed the color of his eyes, but I recognized him."

"It's okay, Beel." Nick patted the heavy shoulder of his top assistant. "The punk did us a left-handed favor in bringing things to a head." He told of how Charon had discovered the Red plot, then outlined his general plan.

"Those Commies can't stand ridicule," Nick summed up. "While I'm gone I want every Communist son tossed into the burning lake. Alarm all guards and tell them how to identify them—the fragrance of sweet peas with an underlying stink. No one in the USSR has used up a cake of soap in twenty years, and the perfume they add can't quite cover the BO."

"Must be a lot of Commies here," Mulciber commented. "How many guards have we, Azzy?"

Azazel, Statistics Chief, glanced at a roll of incombustible microfilm, and cleared his throat. He liked being called upon, and since he had the history of every shade while on Earth, he was the second most feared devil in Hades.

"After promoting the last batch who qualified for better jobs during the minimum millennium at common labor," Azazel said, "and adding—"

"Never mind the commercial!" grouchy Moloch roared. "Boss, how do we know all our guards are to be trusted?"

"We don't," Nick said. "When did we ever trust anybody? But our system of checkers, checkers checking the checkers, super-checkers on up to charter members, hasn't failed yet."

"If His Eminence, The Corpse-Snatcher, is satisfied," Azazel said, smoothing his sleek black hair, "I shall answer Prince Mulciber's polite question. We now have on the guards' roll exactly thirteen million four hundred—"

"That's close enough." Plainly

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pleased with his title, Moloch grinned at the big engineer. "Mulcie, why not build a chute straight up into Moscow? Save the boss trouble. He could take along a few gorillas and toss all those trouble-making stinkers straight into a hot bath."

Nick joined in the laughter. "Trouble with that, Molly, The BBU wouldn't stand for it. Only Death can give the final sting, and even he has to wait for the call. Our game is to play it cagey, stick by the few rules The BBU laid down, and stay out of trouble."

"How do you aim to handle those fellas?" Belial asked.

"Tell you after I do it." Nick guessed the fun-loving Propaganda Chief wanted to go along, but decided Cletus would be a better assistant in a plan already formulated. A boon companion, Belial, for any nefarious project. True, he had the quickest wit of the lot, but had worked over-long in the advertising racket, and many of his schemes resembled those of a hen on a hot griddle.

Nick turned to the secretary. "If you have all this down, Asta, I'll consider a motion to adjourn."

III

IT WAS AN hour short of midnight and snowing in Moscow when Nick landed in the printing room of Pravda, the official Red journal. As he had calculated, several sample newspapers had been run off.

Vichy Volonsky, a short, round-headed man, had held up the rest of the issue while he studied the content through his nose-glasses. Editor Blochensk and the mechanics anxiously awaited the great man's verdict. An unfavorable one meant the concentration camp for everybody. As Minister of Culture, Volonsky previewed all news personally when not running errands for Andrei Broncov at a meeting of the Inner Council.

The Number Two ranking man in the Kremlin clique frowned most frighteningly, then, moved by an odd compulsion, walked into a sound-insulated telephone room. He closed the door and stared at it stupidly while looking through the invisible Nick.

"Why did I come in here?" he said. "There's only the usual bilge in the sheet, nothing to telephone the fat slob about. Yet something made me."

"I did," Nick said, suddenly visible. "When I finish, Pravda will never be the same again. Lie down, Vichy!"

Volonsky opened his mouth, but Nick wiggled a finger, and no yell came out. In the wink of an eye, he squeezed out the Minister's shade and took its place.

"Pretty cramped and smelly quarters," Nick told himself, "but do or die for good old Hades."

"What? Who are you?" Volon-

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sky's phantom teeth chattered. "You must be Nick, himself."

"Russia's patron saint till you amateurs took over. I have business with your boss. I mean Andrei Broncov. Not that it matters, but who conceived the idea of deposing Satan? Talk, *mujik,* and tell the truth. All of it."

"Blame Broncov, not me," Volonsky pleaded. "It was his scheme to kill off several thousand loyal party comrades. They got a choice: Be tortured to death, or die quickly and work for a revolution in Hell as soon as they arrived. Naturally—"

"I've heard enough, rat." Nick spat contemptuously, and a puff of gray smoke spread rapidly over walls, ceiling and floor. "That will hold you," he jeered, and opened the door. Aping the Minister's important waddle, he walked over to the great press.

Editor Blochensk stared with fear-bulged eyes. "Anything—anything wrong, Your Excellency comrade?" he asked shakily.

"Nothing I can't fix."

"Oh!" The editor clutched his throat. "Thank—uh—uh—"

"Never mind, I know Who you mean." Muttering words in Hell's silent lauguage, Nick walked completely around the press. "It's perfect, Blochy. Don't let the content worry you. It's part of The PLAN. Roll out your papers and deliver them fast. Don't question anything. Orders from—you know."

Only minutes ahead of the new Volonsky, Cletus had entered the lobby of the Droshky Hotel on Red Square. The cherubic scout had obeyed orders and made himself bellhop size, large size. He didn't exactly resemble the one in the cigarette ad but he had the kid's twinkle in his dark eyes. And he had already latched onto a luscious blonde; or, more likely, Nick concluded, the reverse.

Having just registered as a Persian prince, Cletus again clanked down a large sack of gold pieces and a smaller one of jewels. "Put these diamonds and rubies into your best safe," he ordered in perfect Russian.

The clerk's eyes began popping, so did the blonde's and those of a score of spectators, including four hard-faced MVD boys.

"And I'll take care of you, Honey-Navi," the blonde said.

"Ah, you just love me for my two billion dollars," the imp retorted, and winked at her. As did Nick, Cletus could plainly see the twist operated on the MVD payroll as well as in her own interests.

"I'm selling out my fifty oil wells," he announced, "and I've come to town to see the head man, whoever he is today. I thought I'd let you dumb *mujiks* bid for the wells before I practically give them to Super-San Oil company for a measly two hundred million dollars."

"Of course, Prince Navi," the clerk said loudly. He nodded to-

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ward the four tough lads who, likewise, had not yet noticed the great Volonsky.

Nick rapped on the counter with his six-carat diamond ring. "How about a little service here, comrade?"

"One moment, comrade," the clerk said nervously.

"What you mean, one moment?" Nick roared. "I haven't flown all the way from New York to have a two-bit clerk tell me to wait. I represent Super-San Oil and I'm here to meet a Persian Prince Navi."

"Quiet, Amerikaner, till—Oh, Your Excellency Comrade Vychy Volonsky!" The mouth of the astonished clerk fell open. Then, fearful of making a wrong move in the Red game of dirty politics, he failed to guess why the great one should act as a miserable capitalist. "A thousand pardons, Your Excellency Comrade. What can I do for the beloved comrade? I didn't recognize you—"

"Hush, fool!" Nick looked toward Cletus just then gazing into the blonde's blue eyes.

The four MVD agents went into a quick huddle, then the one with a broken nose bowed to the fake Volonsky. "If Your Excellency Comrade will step aside with us, we'll explain this fool's mistake."

"Put him in the can and question him tomorrow," Nick snarled. "Anybody can see he's working for the filthy capitalists."

"Of course, Your Excellency Comrade." Broken nose and his three pals escorted Nick to a chair beside a column. "I'm Lieutenant Putov of the MVD," he whispered. "We picked up this Prince Navi the instant he entered, and have been watching him."

"Skip the commercial," Nick said, almost laughing as he gave Moloch's favorite expression. "How come you didn't spot him at one of our airports?"

"He must have landed on an abandoned field in his private plane, Your Excellency Comrade." Lieutenant Putov glanced at the other three equally worried looking plug-uglies. "He's a prince, all right. Look at the gold and jewels he tossed to the clerk, several million dol—I mean, several billion rubles. We haven't checked his story, but he claims he's here to sell fifty Persian oil wells."

"I know *that*, idiot. Our spies in Baghdad advised us yesterday. That's why I pretend to be with the stinking Super-San—Wggh!"

"What are Your Excellency Comrade's wishes?"

"Get him away from that blonde before she ruins our plans."

"Ah, that's Nishka, one of us." Astonishment widened Putov's watery blue eyes. "Have you forgotten the night you and she drank—"

"You talk too much, Putov." Nick flapped a hand. "Get a car to take me and the prince to the Kremlin. Hurry it! Comrade Andrei Broncov and I have a Council meeting at midnight. You

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three, bring the prince to me here."

Cletus and Nishka had withdrawn to a sofa in an alcove off the lobby. Without effort, Nick could see them and hear the female agent saying: "How do I know you have all that money, Navi-Honey? I'll bet you brought gilt lead and fake jewels just to impress me."

"No, but I've been to America," Cletus bragged, knowing well his boss would be listening. "So be nice and I'll prove they're real. I've been everywhere but this lousy place. I even lived in Egypt."

"Talk some Egyptian for me," Nishka wheedled.

"I've forgotten most of it," Cletus said, cannily dodging the trap. "But I once made a study of the ancient language." He ripped out a stream of what had once been his native tongue. Then, partly at least to test Nishka's knowledge, he added in English, "How's for looking at my room before we go out on the town?"

"Wha-at? Why, you bad boy!" The girl winked at her three fellow agents coming toward them in a crablike walk, then spoke in Cletus' ear: "It's the LAW, Navi-Honey, but don't let them worry you. Little Nishka will stay with you—to the limit."

Cletus leered at her and rose to accompany the MVD to the front of the lobby. He and Nick put on an act, then went to the street followed by a chattering crowd.

Once inside the sleek car Putov had conjured up, Nick said: "The heap is wired so we'll talk only in Hell language."

IV

IT WASN'T FAR to the grim walls of the Krèmlin, and as the big car purred across the snowy, radio-stricken square, Nick gave Cletus the main points of his plan. Obviously warned, the police gave a snappy salute and let the car enter the courtyard. A few moments later, Hell's emissaries were zooming through long corridors and up to the second floor; walking the last fifty yards.

Six husky guards armed with sub-machine guns opened the great doors to the Premier's private study. "He's been asking for you," a huge guard whispered.

"He would, the brainless pup," Nick snarled, reading the big fellow's thoughts. A Volonsky man called Gorkzy. "Don't announce us."

Inside the great room, at a desk almost large enough for a roller skating rink, Andrei Broncov appeared to be studying a document. True executive, he went on reading till Nick coughed.

"Your Excellency Comrade Broncov, I have brought Prince Navi. Where is the rest of the Council?"

"Ah!" Broncov's plump face widened in a smile for Cletus. "This is an honor, Your Highness. I trust you will pardon my preoccupation with affairs of state. They're in a mess—as are all capi-

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tals when the old order departs. I supposed you'd be announced." Andrei Broncov glared at the pseudo Volonsky and whispered in a dialect, "The Council is waiting below, fool."

"Nuts," Cletus said. "Talk English, will you? I can hardly understand your outlandish language. Or, speak Persian."

"My knowledge of your native tongue is not good, but I'm quite at home in English or Amerikaner. A Russian invented—"

"Yeah, he knows," Nick cut in. "Forget the mallarkey, Broncco. This lad is here on business and has no time for our phoney hooptedo. From his grandfather, the old Shah, he inherited fifty of the richest oil wells in Asia, and he's giving us a chance to bid on them instead of carrying on a, quote, cold, unquote, war, and steal—"

"I understand," Broncov said through his big teeth. His lips tightened in his rage over Volonsky's direct speech, but he managed to say fairly suavely: "Your Highness, we appreciate your giving us a chance to buy your wells. Surely, a banquet is in order."

"No, I want to get out of this place. It's too cold."

Nick peered over his Volonsky nose-glasses. "How much, kid? No fooling."

"Volonsky!" Broncov barked. "Mind your speech. I'll handle this little deal. You're excused."

"Uh-uh." Nick grinned. "I stay for *my* cut."

"You both look like a couple of crooks to me," said the young prince. "I want two hundred million dollars—in gold."

Broncov's hand shook as he reached for a row of buttons. "How about a bit of tea and cakes, or, perhaps something stronger before we discuss this matter with the Council? They're waiting just below us, and I'd like to present the deal already consummated."

"Got any Old Style Lager around?" Cletus asked.

"We have some good Bavarian beer, a stock we—ah—bought some time ago."

"I've heard how much you paid the Heinies. The beer I want is made in Wisconsin, USA, so I think I'll fly over there tonight. Super-San Oil keeps begging me to visit their country. Offered me two hundred million for my wells but only half in gold. I want all gold, and I won't discuss any other terms."

"Bungler!" Broncov whispered in dialect. "Why didn't you get *him* drunk, first? Without oil we can't carry on this cold war or kid the peasants much longer. Where in hell could we get even two hundred dollars in gold?"

"Go to hell and find all you want," Nick said with a wicked grin.

"I understood what you high-binders said," Cletus put in. "My cousin told me before I left home Communist clucks don't savvy Saturday from Sunday. Everybody

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knows you top boys have stolen everything not nailed down, and have stashed it away against the time your own people kick out Communism for good."

"Oh, come, Prince Navi, I don't understand how such an evil story started. Our people wouldn't dare—"

"Wouldn't they?" Cletus laughed nastily. "We have spies too, and we know your common herd would settle for anything else. Most of them want their church and their Tsar back, bad as he was."

"Bah! The capitalist press started that myth."

"Why, Bronco," Nick protested, "you can read that story in Pravda, 'The Organ of Truth.'" The fake Minister of Culture cleared his throat to keep from laughing when the glowering Premier began thinking of various ways to torture unsympathetic comrades. In silent Hell language, Nick added: "Good work, Cleet. I'll take it from here."

"Lies put out by the war mongerers of Wall Street," Broncov shouted. He continued raving, but Nick no longer listened.

Sounds outside the window told him time had begun pressing. He shook the hat he'd been carrying. "Gold, is it you want, Prince Navi? You think we have none? How about this?"

A glittering gold piece tinkled on the floor and rolled toward the amazed Red Premier. Puffing, he bent over and scooped up a newly minted coin the size of the American gold eagle. "It's a new issue—I—never mind. We have lots more where this came from, haven't we, comrade Vychy?"

"I'll say," Nick said. "Watch!"

Gold pieces continued falling from the hat, one by one, then in a steady stream. Stunned, Broncov clutched his throat, muttering: "It can't be true. Miracles don't happen."

He watched in silence while his Minister of Culture made a pile of gold coins four feet high. When the floor timbers began creaking, Nick made another similar heap; then, others, till the thick walls began bulging inward.

"Stop!" Broncov cried. "A couple of tons is enough." Eyes now popping, he waved his arms as the floor sagged under fifty times that weight. "There's the two hundred million for you, Prince. The rest is for—us. We'll sign the papers in another room."

Ignoring frightened cries, Nick made more piles of gold next to the windows. Outside on Red Square, people were running in all directions, shouting and waving newspapers. A cannon roared. A hundred or more machine guns began rattling. Plainly, the bullets were not fired at any one, for the people were laughing and weeping, singing and dancing.

"Come here and have a look, Bronco," Nick suggested.

"It's—a trick, a revolution," Broncov panted. "Damn you, Volonsky, you started it." He snatched

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a heavy revolver from his desk and fired it at Nick without warning.

The false Volonsky laughed when five of the slugs bounced off the invisible shield around him. A sixth bullet splintered the window glass. The other five returned and struck the raging Red boss, cutting his face and arms enough to bring streams of blood. He dashed for the door but collided with the six guards who burst into the room.

Broncov wiped off some of the blood running into his eyes well enough to see all six waving copies of Pravda. "What's going on here?" he screamed.

"Read about it in Pravda," bellowed Gorkzy, the huge guard. "It always prints the truth—you've taught us."

"What truth?" quavered the Premier. "Put down those guns!"

"Oh, no. Pravda says you were shot trying to escape, and for once it really told the truth." Implacably, the big guard brought up his Tommy-gun and let it ratttle.

The stricken Red leader took two steps backward and fell to the floor as the other five guns opened up on him in a hell's chatter of death. His falling weight added the last straw to the overstrained floor timbers. They gave way in a roar, and a hundred tons of yellow gold streamed downward in a cataclysmic wave of wealth and death to the Council members below.

Poised on air, Nick and Cletus became invisible to mortal eyes. "That wraps it, Cleet. Let's see how the boys take it."

The six guards were peerring down into the ruin below, and at some of the fortune still clinging to the slanting floor.

"Great Nicholas!" Gorkzy yelled. "Gold!"

"Just like Pravda says," howled another man. "Listen! It says: 'Volonsky and the mysterious Persian prince have disappeared. Broncov executed by heroic guards. All members of the once-feared Inner Council crushed almost beyond recognition when floor crashed upon them from the weight of the gold brought by the prince.' "

"And look at this!" roared the big Gorkzy. " 'All soldiers and police throw down their arms. Refuse to shoot the people shouting they want their Tsar and church back. Satellite countries freed of the odious Communist yoke. Concentration camps, collective farming, and slave labor abolished. All spies and saboteurs recalled to Moscow for trial and punishment. Ivan, the Tsar, to issue proclamation.' "

"What Tsar?" The six stared stupidly at one another.

One man picked up a shiny gold piece and tested it with his teeth. "The Bolsheviks murdered the old goat and all his family. How can this be?"

"He probably left plenty of bastards," another man hazarded.

"I get it," Gorkzy shouted. "Prince Navi is a grandson. His name is N-a-v-i—Ivan spelled

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backward. Why, the smart little devil! And now he's here some place to reign over us."

"Oh, no," Cletus protested as he and Nick slithered through the wall. "You aren't going to make me rule over these dopes, boss. Have a heart. It's cold here, and the whole country stinks."

"That's your punishment, m'lad, for letting Raphael and Michael catch onto you. You can't prowl around Heaven just now so you'll have to work here in Hell's Rear Annex for a while. Look!" Nick thumbed one of the gold pieces. "Your image stamped on all of them. Also 'Ivan—Tsar. In God We Trust.'"

"Okay," Cletus said, shuffling a little, then brightening. "Anyhow, I'll have Nishka."

"Not if the common folks find out she worked for the MVD." As if to punctuate Nick's prophesy, a dozen bombs exploded inside police headquarters.

"Heck!" Cletus shrugged resignedly. "Well, lend me that hat, and conjure up a couple million tons of soap—not perfumed."

Roaring with laughter, Nick promised to spread soap over the entire country, then watched the little imp zooming back and forth across Red Square—sprinkling the snowy pavement with Ivan-Tsar pieces of gold.

The Satanic laughter lasted till Nick had whizzed half way across Chaos. "That caper," he told himself gleefully, "will fool The BBU about my plan. Or, will it? Great Hades! I did a *good* deed."

A million miles above the wastes of Chaos, he remembered he still wore Volonsky whose shade would still be imprisoned in the Pravda room. Nick shucked out of his unpleasant quarters, halted to watch the thing spinning downward.

"Cheer up, Vych," he laughed. "Next century I'll gather up what's left and give it back to you—maybe."

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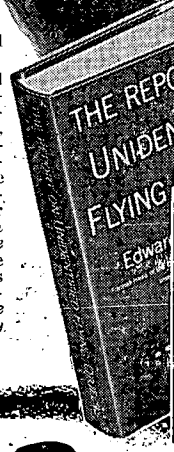

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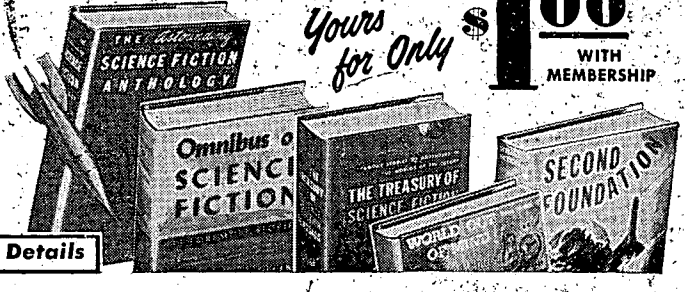
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